My Relationship Is Better Than—and Not as Bad as—Yours Is: The Perception of Superiority in Close Relationships

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This research studies naturally occurring thoughts about relationships to test hypotheses regarding the tendency to perceive one's own relationship as superior to others' relationships. Using a thought-listing technique, four experiments conducted in the United States and two experiments conducted in the Netherlands demonstrated that subjects hold more positive beliefs about their own relationships than other relationships (positive superiority) and hold fewer negative beliefs about their own relationships than other relationships (negative superiority). Also, subjects' beliefs about their own relationships are composed of far more positive than negative information (own relationship positivity), whereas perceptions of other relationships are dominated by negative information (other relationships negativity). These findings were obtained when subjects listed positive and negative thoughts regarding global features of relationships; parallel findings emerged for descriptions of constructive and destructive reactions to specific dissatisfying incidents.

> Love is the state in which man sees things most widely different from what they are. The force of illusion reaches its zenith here, as likewise the sweetening and transfiguring power.
>
> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche
> *The Antichrist*

Relationships are not experienced in a vacuum. Although the perceived quality of a relationship is determined in part by the good and bad properties believed to be linked with the relationship, there is good reason to assume that such evaluations to some extent may also be socially defined. That is, the perceived quality of a relationship may further be affected by the good and bad properties believed to be associated with other people's relationships. This claim may be derived from both classic and contemporary formulations of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wills, 1991; Wood, 1989) as well as from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), which states that individuals evaluate their relationships using internal standards that are largely socially defined (i.e., comparison level, comparison level for alternatives). Indeed, prior research demonstrates that individuals' thoughts and feelings regarding their ongoing relationships are related to their perceptions of others' relationships (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990) and that on average these beliefs are quite favorable. For example, individuals believe that their marriages are more equitable than other people's marriages and believe that other individuals compared to themselves would be more likely to abandon a seriously ill partner (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983).

Unfortunately, this body of research is exceedingly small and has not yet provided insight into the precise manner in which individuals come to regard their rela-

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tionships in relatively favorable terms. That is, it is not clear whether individuals overlook or minimize negative information about their own relationships, whether they embrace or exaggerate negative information regarding others' relationships, or whether they actively seek positive information that places their relationships in relative favor. Furthermore, although some research on self-other judgments and individual-level social comparison has examined how comparison beliefs are expressed in individuals' spontaneous, everyday thoughts (e.g., Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman, 1985), most research in the relationships domain thus far has employed researcher-structured methodologies. As Wood et al. (1985) have suggested, "free-response comparisons . . . may be more central to the individual's experience than the comparisons elicited by investigator-designed questions" (p. 1172).

The current work studies naturally occurring thoughts regarding relationships, examining the way in which *perceived superiority* is manifested in individuals' beliefs about their own and others' close relationships. We propose that examination of individuals' spontaneous thoughts about relationships will reveal a relatively pervasive tendency for individuals to perceive their relationships as better than—and not as bad as—other individuals' relationships. Also, we suggest that, whereas positive beliefs dominate thinking about one's own relationship, negative beliefs dominate thinking about others' relationships. Why might this be so?

The Functional Value of Perceived Relationship Superiority

The existing literature on illusion and well-being suggests that self-enhancing perceptions are quite prevalent in everyday judgments and that it may be adaptive to (a) evaluate oneself quite positively, (b) perceive one's life to be personally controlled, and (c) feel very optimistic regarding one's future (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tyler & Hastie, 1991). Although the adaptive value of such tendencies may be limited when exaggerations become excessive, a fair amount of self-enhancement seems to be functional, particularly in situations that may threaten self-worth and well-being. Self-enhancing tendencies appear to stimulate feelings of happiness and contentment, the ability to care for and about others, and the capacity for creative, productive work (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Similarly, the health and vitality of a relationship may benefit from relationship-enhancing tendencies. The prominence of positive beliefs about one's relationship may promote feelings of happiness, trust, and security, particularly when the relationship is threatened (e.g., by periodic declines in satisfaction, by attractive alternatives). Also, such beliefs may motivate partners to exert the energies needed to maintain a healthy relationship—for example, by accommodating rather than retaliating when a partner engages in a potentially destructive act (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Compared to self-enhancement processes, relationship enhancement may be more complex, involving not just the self but also the partner and the broader relationship. Increased interdependence may bring about the following changes: (a) a shift in motivation, moving from self-centered desire to benefit oneself toward desire to benefit the relationship (cf. Clark & Mills, 1979; Kelley, 1983), and (b) a shift in identity, such that collective identity becomes more prominent and individual identity recedes (e.g., thinking in terms of *we* rather than *I*; cf. Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Kelley, 1983; Wegner, 1980). Thus the information that can be used to develop positive views of a relationship is multifaceted, including not only the self but also the partner and the broader relationship. Moreover, motivations for enhancement may be multifaceted, stemming from desire to enhance oneself, a beloved other, and/or a collectivistically defined identity (cf. Hogg & Turner, 1987; Tesser, 1988).

Although enhancement in the context of relationships seems relatively complex and multifaceted, the existing literature on self-enhancement provides insight into how individuals might come to regard their relationships in favorable terms. This body of research reveals that individuals believe they are better than other people—in terms of very global comparisons (e.g., attributes such as honesty, generosity) as well as relatively more specific behavioral judgments (e.g., helping a friend, taking the smaller of two remaining pieces of pizza) (see, Alicke, 1985; Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Brown, 1986; Goethals, 1986). At the same time, individuals exhibit a parallel tendency to believe they are not as bad as other people—again, in terms of global comparisons (e.g., attributes such as selfishness, deceitfulness, rudeness; Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986) as well as relatively more specific behavioral judgments (e.g., cheating on tests, nosing around in others' business, stealing bicycles; Liebrand, Messick, & Wolters, 1986; Messick et al., 1985; Van Lange, 1991).

A variety of psychological mechanisms may contribute to perceived superiority in beliefs regarding close relationships. For example, the ability to develop and maintain superior beliefs may rest on the amount and nature of information people possess about their own and others' relationships, as well as the manner in which individuals process new information regarding relationships. At a global level, people are likely to hold fairly positive beliefs about both their own and others' relationships; individuals tend to hold relatively positive beliefs about the social world (cf. Fiske, 1980; Kanouse & Hanson, 1971) and may further assume that most ongoing relationships are moderately good (i.e., logically,

positive attributes and behaviors would seem to be at least part of what motivates people to remain in relationships). In the context of such benign global views, individuals are likely to assign more attention and weight to incoming negative information than to positive information—the so-called negativity effect (e.g., Kanouse & Hanson, 1971; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989).

However, whereas such tendencies are likely to be quite prominent in thinking about others' relationships, the negativity effect in thinking about their own relationships may be overshadowed by cognitive filters through which positive information is welcomed and negative information is denied or softened. Also, social filters may maximize the odds of receiving negative information about others' relationships (e.g., via gossip or the media). Moreover, individuals may interpret negative information regarding their own relationships in light of knowledge regarding intentions, in recognition of the fact that good intentions sometimes yield negative outcomes. In thinking about their own relationships, individuals may also take into account knowledge of both the positive outcomes and the investments and energy expenditures required to bring about those outcomes (cf. Liebrand et al., 1986; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Weinstein, 1980).

The ability to develop and maintain superior beliefs may also rest on social comparison processes (e.g., Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Wood, 1989). For example, in ongoing relationships, partners may be motivated to engage in downward comparison, comparing their own relationships to actual or imaginary relationships that are worse off (e.g., "other partners hit each other"; Wills, 1991). Also, partners may engage in dimensional comparison, selectively focusing on attributes that make their own relationships appear advantaged (e.g., "we do the dishes together; other partners don't"; Wood & Taylor, 1991). Such tendencies may have implications for the content and salience of the beliefs individuals hold regarding their own and others' relationships (e.g., downward comparison may increase number of negative thoughts about others' relationships).

Research Design and Hypotheses

The above lines of reasoning add credence to the claim that individuals perceive their relationships as superior to others' relationships. The present research seeks to (a) demonstrate that superiority effects exist in the context of close relationships, and (b) examine the manner in which perceived superiority is manifested in this domain. Using a relatively naturalistic method adopted from previous work by Messick et al. (1985), the current research asked individuals to list the positive and negative qualities that spontaneously come to mind when thinking about their own and others' relationships. Individuals then rated each belief for degree of positivity versus negativity. This procedure allows us to examine both (a) the number of positive and negative beliefs individuals hold regarding their own and other relationships, and (b) the average degree of positivity versus negativity of those beliefs.

In this context, the superiority phenomena described above can be decomposed into four distinct effects. Two effects concern the existence and form of perceived superiority. Hypothesis 1 predicts that individuals exhibit *positive superiority* (i.e., "my relationship is better than other relationships"): Compared to their descriptions of other relationships, subjects, in describing their own relationships, will identify a greater number of favorable qualities and will assign the favorable qualities of their own relationships more positive ratings. Hypothesis 2 predicts that individuals exhibit *negative superiority* (i.e., "my relationship is not as bad as other relationships"): Compared to descriptions of others' relationships, subjects, in describing their own relationships, will identify fewer unfavorable qualities and will assign the unfavorable qualities of their own relationships less negative ratings.

The above arguments also suggest that individuals characterize their own and others' relationships differently. Hypothesis 3 concerns *own relationship positivity*, the claim that positive information dominates thinking about one's own relationship: Subjects will hold a greater number of favorable than unfavorable beliefs regarding their own relationships, and the favorable beliefs will be more extreme (i.e., the absolute value of positive ratings will exceed the absolute value of negative ratings). Hypothesis 4 concerns *other relationships negativity*, the claim that negative information dominates thinking about others' relationships: Subjects will hold a greater number of unfavorable than favorable beliefs regarding other relationships, and the unfavorable beliefs will be more extreme (i.e., the absolute value of negative ratings will exceed the absolute value of positive ratings).

EXPERIMENTS 1 THROUGH 4

Four initial experiments were designed to test Hypotheses 1 through 4. In Experiments 1 and 2, undergraduates who were involved in ongoing dating relationships were asked to list the constructive and destructive behaviors that spontaneously came to mind when thinking about responses to periodic dissatisfaction in their own and others' dating relationships. After listing their thoughts, subjects rated each thought for degree of constructiveness versus destructiveness. Using an identical method, Experiments 3 and 4 examined global beliefs, asking subjects to list positive and negative features of their own and others' dating relationships.

The reason for examining both specific responses and global features was to demonstrate the generality of our hypotheses. Moreover, whereas the instructions for Experiments 1 and 2 might orient subjects toward thoughts concerning themselves in the context of a relationship (e.g., distressed behaviors they themselves perform), the instructions for Experiments 3 and 4 should orient subjects toward their partners and relationships (e.g., desirable features of their relationships or partners). We also reasoned that if enhancement involves selective focus on attributes that make one's relationship appear advantaged (i.e., dimensional comparison), broadening the domain subjects perused (i.e., moving from a specific domain to more global thoughts) should yield even stronger findings. That is, the broader the comparison domain, the more selective and relationship-enhancing the effects may be (cf. Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Goethals et al., 1991). The four experiments differed in one final respect—whether or not item samples were included in the instructions. In Experiments 1 and 3, we used item samples to illustrate the thought-listing task. However, given that sample prompts may color subjects' thoughts or enhance the salience of certain types of thought, Experiments 2 and 4 replicated these experiments but deleted the prompts.

Method

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 87 undergraduates (48 women, 39 men) who participated in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at the University of North Carolina. Subjects were 19.84 years old on average (19.79 for women, 19.90 for men). Sign-up sheets indicated that "to participate you must currently be involved in a dating relationship of at least three months in duration." Subjects' relationships were an average of 17.64 months in duration (17.79 for women, 17.46 for men). Subjects participated in same-sex groups ranging in size from 5 to 12 people. About equal numbers of women and men were assigned to each experiment (10 women, 10 men in Experiments 1 and 3; 15 women, 8 men in Experiment 2; 13 women, 11 men in Experiment 4).

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Each experiment was a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design. In each experiment, there were two within-subject independent variables—item valence (positive vs. negative; specifically, this factor represents constructive vs. destructive responses to dissatisfaction in Experiments 1 and 2, positive vs. negative features of relationships in Experiments 3 and 4) and item object (items describing own relationship vs. other relationships). Each experiment also included two between-subjects variables—subject sex (women vs. men) and order (positive vs. negative items listed first).

Each subject completed a three-page questionnaire. Each of the first two pages asked subjects to list their thoughts regarding dating relationships; subjects listed positive qualities on one page and negative qualities on a second page. In Experiments 1 and 2, subjects listed constructive and destructive responses to dissatisfaction; in Experiments 3 and 4, subjects listed positive and negative features of relationships. Order was counterbalanced within experiments. For example, subjects in Experiment 1 read the following on a page entitled "Constructive Responses to Dissatisfaction":

> Everyone experiences occasional dissatisfying incidents in their relationships—times when one or the other partner feels unhappy, upset, or angry about something (something the other said or did, something about the relationship itself, etc.). Below, please list the ways in which partners react to such incidents that you think are constructive, or helpful to the future of a relationship. If you think that a particular behavior is more typical of your actions in your relationship than of others' actions in their relationships, begin the sentence with "I . . ."; if you think that a behavior is more typical of others' actions than of your own, begin the sentence with "They . . . ." You will be given five minutes. For example:
>
> "I forgive my partner and forget about it."
> "They try to change their behavior to solve the problem."
> "I suggest that we talk things over."
> "They wait to see if conditions will improve."

In contrast, the page for the negative valence condition was entitled "Destructive Responses to Dissatisfaction," and the phrase "destructive, or harmful to the future of a relationship" was substituted for "constructive, or helpful to the future of a relationship." The sample behaviors were "They suggest ending the relationship," "I avoid dealing with the problem," "I say I'm thinking about breaking up," and "They just let things fall apart."

Experiment 2 instructions were identical except that sample prompts were deleted and the first sentence was modified to read: "No one is consistently well-behaved. In all relationships, individuals occasionally behave in ways that are potentially harmful to the relationship, saying or doing things that make the partner upset or angry (e.g., they're rude or irritable, say something unkind, speak in a raised voice, or otherwise show a lack of consideration for the partner and their relationship)." Subjects were given 5 minutes to complete each thought-listing task, and then they rated each behavior in their lists using a 9-point Likert-type scale (–4 = *extremely destructive*, +4 = *extremely constructive*).

In Experiment 3, subjects read the following instructions on a page entitled "Good Things About Relationships and Partners":

In the space below, please list features of romantic relationships and partners that you think of as good and desirable. If you think that a feature is more typical of your relationship or partner than of others', begin the sentence with "My relationship . . . " or "My partner . . .''; if you think that a feature is more typical of others' relationships or partners than of yours, begin the sentence with "Other people's relationships . . ." or "Other people's partners . . . ." You will be given five minutes. For example:

"My relationship is one of complete trust."
"Other people's partners are honest."
"My partner has a good sense of humor."
"Other people's relationships are exciting."

In contrast, the page for the negative valence condition was entitled "Bad Things About Relationships and Partners," "bad and undesirable" was substituted for "good and desirable," and "bad feature" was substituted for "good feature." The sample behaviors were "Other people's partners complain a lot," "My relationship doesn't have much intellectual stimulation," "My partner is jealous," and "Other people's relationships are emotionally distant."

The instructions for Experiment 4 were identical except that sample prompts were deleted. Subjects were given 5 minutes to complete each thought-listing task, and then they rated each item in their lists using a 9-point Likert-type scale (–4 = *not at all desirable*, +4 = *extremely desirable*). The third page of the questionnaire asked subjects to report their age, sex, and the duration of their current relationships. When all subjects were finished, they were fully debriefed and thanked.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

As mentioned earlier, two measures were calculated for each experimental condition: number of items and average item rating. For average item rating, when subjects failed to list any items in a given category (e.g., when a subject listed no negative qualities for his or her relationship), a mean rating of zero (neutral) was assigned for that category. (We reasoned that if a subject listed no positive qualities for other relationships, those relationships were regarded as neutral on average, at best; if a subject listed no negative qualities for own relationship, the relationship was regarded as neutral on average, at worst.) To develop average rating scores that parallel the number scores, we recorded the absolute value of subjects' average item ratings. Thus, in examining destructive behaviors, higher values reflect greater destructiveness—a greater number of destructive behaviors and greater average destructiveness. (Of course, in examining constructive behaviors, higher values reflect a greater number of constructive behaviors as well as greater average constructiveness.)

Results

To determine whether Hypotheses 1 through 4 received support across the four experiments, we first combined the data from Experiments 1 through 4 and analyzed them in six-factor analyses of variance. Two independent variables were within-subject factors—item valence (positive vs. negative) and item object (own vs. other relationships). Four independent variables were between-subjects factors—experiment type (responses to dissatisfaction vs. features of relationships; Experiments 1 and 2 vs. Experiments 3 and 4), presence of prompts (prompts vs. no prompts; Experiments 1 and 3 vs. Experiments 2 and 4), subject sex, and order. We also performed four-factor analyses of variance for each experiment (i.e., Item Valence × Item Object × Subject Sex × Order) to determine whether our predictions were supported in all four studies. Table 1 displays mean number of items and average item ratings as a function of experiment type, item valence, and item object; Table 2 presents an analysis of variance summary table.

POSITIVE SUPERIORITY AND NEGATIVE SUPERIORITY

In support of Hypotheses 1 and 2 (and Hypotheses 3 and 4, discussed below), significant interactions of item valence by item object were revealed for both number of items and average item ratings not only for the combined data set (i.e., in the six-factor analyses) but also separately for all four experiments (i.e., in each four-factor analysis; see Table 2, Item Valence × Item Object). Tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of positive superiority, across the four experiments as well as separately for each experiment (see Table 2, Positive Superiority Effect). Within the positive item valence condition, own relationship items were significantly more frequent and were rated more positively than were other relationships items (see Table 1). And consistent with Hypothesis 2, tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of negative superiority, across the four experiments as well as separately for each experiment (see Table 2, Negative Superiority Effect). Within the negative item valence condition, own relationship items were significantly less frequent and were rated less negatively than were other relationships items (see Table 1). Thus Hypotheses 1 and 2—predicting positive superiority and negative superiority, respectively—received support for both measures in all four experiments.

OWN RELATIONSHIP POSITIVITY AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS NEGATIVITY

In support of Hypothesis 3, tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of own relationship positivity. For both number of items and average item ratings, this effect was significant for the combined data set as well as separately for each experiment (see Table 2, Own

TABLE 1: Mean Number of Items and Average Item Ratings as a Function of Experiment Type, Item Valence, and Item Object, Experiments 1 Through 4

Experiment Type/Prompts Versus No Prompts	*Item Object Conditions*	
	Own Relationship	*Other Relationships*
Number of items		
Exp. 1—Responses to dissatisfaction, prompts		
Positive item valence	4.45	1.95
Negative item valence	3.40	4.45
Exp. 2—Responses to dissatisfaction, no prompts		
Positive item valence	4.54	2.04
Negative item valence	1.96	5.25
Exp. 3—Features of relationships, prompts		
Positive item valence	7.65	1.55
Negative item valence	2.90	5.25
Exp. 4—Features of relationships, no prompts		
Positive item valence	7.22	1.43
Negative item valence	2.35	5.26
Average item ratings[a]		
Exp. 1—Responses to dissatisfaction, prompts		
Positive item valence	2.91	2.06
Negative item valence	2.33	2.90
Exp. 2—Responses to dissatisfaction, no prompts		
Positive item valence	2.75	1.48
Negative item valence	1.53	2.87
Exp. 3—Features of relationships, prompts		
Positive item valence	3.32	1.37
Negative item valence	1.64	3.16
Exp. 4—Features of relationships, no prompts		
Positive item valence	3.31	1.58
Negative item valence	1.63	3.10

[a] The absolute value of item ratings was analyzed, such that higher numbers represent more extreme ratings (range = 0 to 4; in the positive valence condition, higher numbers represent more positive ratings; in the negative valence condition, higher numbers represent more negative ratings).

Relationship Positivity Effect). In describing their own relationships, subjects listed a greater number of positive than negative beliefs and assigned more extreme item ratings to positive than negative beliefs (see Table 1). And in support of Hypothesis 4, tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of other relationships negativity, across experiments as well as separately for each experiment (see Table 2). In describing other relationships, subjects listed a greater number of negative than positive beliefs, and the extremity of their average ratings was greater for negative beliefs than for positive beliefs. Thus Hypotheses 3 and 4 received support for both measures in all four experiments.

In addition to the effects reported above, the six-factor analyses revealed a main effect of item object for number of items, $F(1, 71) = 11.68$, $p < .01$; effect n.s. for average item ratings. Subjects generally listed more thoughts regarding their own relationships than for other relationships ($Ms = 4.31$ vs. 3.39). The main effects of item valence were not significant.

EFFECTS INVOLVING EXPERIMENT TYPE

We examined results from the six-factor analyses to explore effects involving experiment type. Out of eight possible effects involving experiment type, item object, and item valence (one main effect and three interactions for two measures), five effects were significant. First, there was a significant main effect of experiment type for number of items, $F(1, 71) = 4.06$, $p < .05$; effect n.s. for average item ratings. Compared to subjects in the response-to-dissatisfaction studies, subjects in the features-of-relationships studies listed a greater number of thoughts ($Ms = 3.51$ vs. 4.20). Second, the experiment type by item valence interaction was significant for number of items, $F(1, 71) = 18.50$, $p < .01$; effect n.s. for average ratings. Tests of simple effects revealed that although the effect of item valence was significant in both the response-to-dissatisfaction studies, $F(1, 36) = 11.98$, $p < .01$, and the features-of-relationships studies, $F(1, 35) = 7.62$, $p < .01$, these effects were opposite in direction: Subjects listed a greater number of negative than positive responses to dissatisfaction ($Ms = 3.77$ vs. 3.25), whereas they listed more positive than negative features of relationships ($Ms = 4.47$ vs. 3.94). Third, there was a significant interaction of experiment type by item object for number of items, $F(1, 71) = 7.09$, $p < .01$; effect n.s. for average ratings. Tests of simple effects revealed that whereas the item object effect was nonsignificant in

TABLE 2: *F* Values for Item Valence by Item Object Interactions, Along With Tests of Simple Effects for Positive Superiority, Negative Superiority, Own Relationship Positivity, and Other Relationships Negativity, Experiments 1 Through 4

Effect/Measure	*Exp. 1*	*Exp. 2*	*Exp. 3*	*Exp. 4*	*Combined Data*
Item Valence × Item Object					
Number of items	38.33**	35.79**	30.86**	35.13**	123.23**
Average item ratings	14.23**	33.61**	61.76**	42.46**	159.47**
Positive superiority effect					
Number of items	39.37**	9.48**	34.41**	52.64**	108.09**
Average item ratings	6.45*	21.32**	34.73**	26.31**	82.46**
Negative superiority effect					
Number of items	4.62*	13.26**	6.70*	7.49**	29.88**
Average item ratings	17.08**	25.67**	48.44**	47.79**	124.75**
Own relationship positivity					
Number of items	7.54*	24.47**	24.13**	43.15**	94.23**
Average item ratings	8.46*	16.06**	72.27**	41.22**	103.70**
Other relationships negativity					
Number of items	44.25**	39.87**	31.74**	21.29**	116.82**
Average item ratings	9.28**	25.23**	26.79**	18.11**	76.22**

NOTE: For all of the above analyses, Experiment 1 $df = 1, 16$; Experiment 2 $df = 1, 20$; Experiment 3 $df = 1, 16$; Experiment 4 $df = 1, 20$; Combined Data $df = 1, 71$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

the response-to-dissatisfaction studies, this effect was significant in the features-of-relationships studies, $F(1, 35) = 20.70$, $p < .01$, in which subjects reported a greater number of beliefs regarding their own relationships than other relationships (Ms = 5.03 vs. 3.37).

Fourth, there were significant three-way interactions of experiment type by item valence by item object for both number of items, $F(1, 71) = 9.35$, $p < .01$, and average item ratings, $F(1, 71) = 8.35$, $p < .01$. Tests of simple effects revealed that, although the item valence by item object interaction was significant in both types of study (see Table 3), this effect was stronger in the features-of-relationships studies for number and average, Fs(1, 35) = 66.10 and 99.83, ps < .01, than in the response-to-dissatisfaction studies, Fs(1, 36) = 61.65 and 44.79, ps < .01. To further explore the nature of this interaction, we examined interactions of experiment type with the tests of simple effects that address Hypotheses 1 through 4. For both number of items and average item ratings, there were significant interactions of experiment type by positive superiority, Fs(1, 71) = 16.67 and 5.21, ps < .05. Within the positive item type condition, subjects' tendencies to describe their own relationships more favorably than other relationships were greater for the features studies than for the responses studies; this was true for both number of items (Ms = 7.44 vs. 1.49 for the features studies and 4.50 vs. 2.00 for the responses studies) and average item ratings (Ms = 3.31 vs. 1.47 for the features studies and 2.83 vs. 1.77 for the responses studies). Also, the experiment type by own relationship positivity interaction was significant for both number and average ratings, Fs(1, 71) = 18.11 and 9.69, ps < .01. In describing their own relationships, the tendency to express more positive than negative beliefs was greater for the features studies than for the responses studies; this was true for both number of items (Ms = 7.44 vs. 2.62 for the features study and 4.50 vs. 2.68 for the responses studies) and average item ratings (Ms = 3.31 vs. 1.64 for the features studies and 2.83 vs. 1.93 for the responses studies). Only one remaining interaction with experiment type was significant—experiment type by negative superiority for average item ratings, $F(1, 71) = 6.73$, $p < .05$. The disparity between negative ratings of own relationships and other relationships was greater for the features studies than for the responses studies (Ms = 1.64 vs. 3.13 for the features studies and 1.93 vs. 2.88 for the responses studies). Thus, although subjects exhibited strong and consistent tendencies toward perceived superiority in all four experiments, this tendency was somewhat more marked in the global features-of-relationships studies, in which subjects were free to describe whatever aspects of relationships they chose to address. The discrepancy between the features studies and the responses studies was most marked for positive superiority and for own relationship positivity.

OTHER EFFECTS

Finally, we examined the remaining effects involving presence of prompts, subject sex, and order of item valence (and their interactions with item valence, item object, and experiment type). Out of a total of 112 remaining effects (56 main effects or interactions for two measures), only 7 effects were statistically significant.[1] Given that this number of significant findings could easily occur by chance—and given that the effects were scattered and inconsistent—they will not be discussed.

EXPERIMENTS 5 AND 6

Experiments 5 and 6 were conducted to further establish the robustness of the superiority effects observed in Experiments 1 through 4, as well as to address limitations of the first four experiments. Importantly, in Experiments 1 through 4, subjects were asked to assign each of their thoughts regarding relationships (i.e., each response or feature they listed) to one of two categories—either to their own or to other relationships. It is possible that some items were actually seen as inherent to involvement in a relationship and that such items—to about the same extent—were thought to characterize both their own and other relationships. When forced to assign such thoughts to just one category, subjects may have reacted in a self-serving manner, assigning positive items to their own relationships and negative items to other relationships. Thus the forced-choice method used in these experiments may have exaggerated the superiority effects we observed. Hence Experiments 5 and 6 employed a method that did not force subjects to choose between the categories of own relationship versus other relationships, allowing subjects to assign items to a third category—"describes both own and other relationships." Also, we wished to demonstrate that the observed superiority effects are robust across at least two cultures. Accordingly, Experiments 5 and 6—which examine beliefs about responses to dissatisfaction and features of relationships, respectively—were conducted in the Netherlands.

Method

SUBJECTS

In total, 45 female and 43 male Dutch subjects were recruited by an advertisement placed in a local university paper. Subjects were 22.63 years old on average (21.96 for women, and 23.33 for men). The advertisement indicated that "to participate you must currently be involved in a dating relationship of at least three months in duration." Subjects' relationships were an average of 27.14 months in duration (29.73 for women, 24.42 for men). Each subject was paid 12.50 Dutch guilders (about $8 in United States currency). Subjects participated in groups ranging in size from 10 to 16 people and were randomly assigned to either Experiment 5 (20 women, 24 men) or Experiment 6 (25 women, 19 men). One subject in Experiment 5 overlooked a page of the research booklet and therefore failed to list destructive items; this subject's data were excluded from all analyses.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Each experiment was a 2 × 3 × 2 × 2 factorial design, with two within-subject variables (item valence and item object) and two between-subjects variables (subject sex and order). Unlike Experiments 1 through 4, item object was a three-level factor (own relationship vs. own-and-other relationships vs. other relationships). The instructions for Experiments 5 and 6 were similar to those used in the response-to-dissatisfaction studies (Experiments 1 and 2) and the features-of-relationships studies (Experiments 3 and 4). However, unlike Experiments 1 through 4, the current studies asked subjects first to simply list (a) as many examples as possible of constructive (or destructive) responses that generally occur in relationships (Experiment 5), or (b) as many examples as possible of positive (or negative) features that characterize relationships in general. They were given 5 minutes to complete each list; order of item valence was counterbalanced within each experiment.

After completing both lists, subjects were asked to return to the first list they completed and record one of three letters beside each item to indicate whether it was (a) more characteristic of the subject's own relationship, (b) more characteristic of other relationships, or (c) equally characteristic of own-and-other relationships (i.e., "there is no difference"). Then, subjects rated each item using the scales employed in Experiments 1 through 4 (for Experiment 5, –4 = *extremely destructive*, +4 = *extremely constructive;* for Experiment 6, *–4 = extremely undesirable*, +4 = *extremely desirable*). Finally, as in Experiments 1 through 4, in the event that a subject failed to list any items in a given category, a mean rating of zero (neutral) was assigned to that category. Also, we recorded the absolute values of subjects' average item ratings so that higher numbers reflect more extreme ratings.

Results

The data from each experiment were analyzed using 2 × 3 × 2 × 2 analyses of valance (i.e., Item Valence × Item Object × Subject Sex × Order). To determine whether any effects differed in strength for the two experiments, we also performed five-factor analyses, including experiment type as an additional between-subjects factor. Table 3 displays mean number of items and average item ratings for each experimental condition; Table 4 is an analysis of variance summary table.

POSITIVE SUPERIORITY AND NEGATIVE SUPERIORITY

To parallel the analysis strategy of Experiments 1 through 4 and directly test Hypotheses 1 and 2, the relevant statistical tests involve specialized contrasts of two out of three item object conditions. That is, in Experiments 5 and 6, we wish to determine whether the own relationship condition significantly differs from the other relationships condition under circumstances in which subjects are allowed to link their thoughts to a third category—both own and other relationships. Accordingly, in the following discussion, we focus on the dichot-

TABLE 3: Mean Number of Items and Average Item Ratings as a Function of Experiment Type, Item Valence, and Item Object, Experiments 5 and 6

Experiment Type	*Item Object Conditions*		
	Own Relationship	*Own-and-Other Relationships*	*Other Relationships*
Number of items			
Exp. 5—Responses to dissatisfaction			
Positive item valence	2.12_a	1.86_a	0.98_b
Negative item valence	1.30_b	1.51_b	2.98_a
Exp. 6—Features of relationships			
Positive item valence	2.52_b	3.55_a	0.66_c
Negative item valence	1.30_b	2.07_a	1.46_{ab}
Average item ratings [1]			
Exp. 5—Responses to dissatisfaction			
Positive item valence	2.38_a	1.85_{ab}	1.34_b
Negative item valence	1.44_b	1.80_b	2.41_a
Exp. 6—Features of relationships			
Positive item valence	2.92_a	2.66_a	0.89_b
Negative item valence	1.45_a	1.77_a	1.82_a

NOTE: Within each row, means with different subscripts differ significantly, $p < .05$. For these pairwise comparisons, Experiment 5 $df = 1, 42$; Experiment 6 $df = 1, 43$.

[1] The absolute value of item ratings was analyzed, such that higher numbers represent more extreme ratings (range = 0 to 4; in the positive valence condition, higher numbers represent more positive ratings; in the negative valence condition, higher numbers represent more negative ratings).

TABLE 4: *F* Values for Item Valence by Item Object Interactions, Along With Tests of Simple Effects for Positive Superiority, Negative Superiority, Own Relationship Positivity, and Other Relationships Negativity, Experiments 5 and 6

Effect/Measure	*Experiment 5*	*Experiment 6*	*Combined Data*
Item Valence × Item Object			
Number of items	11.35**	12.37**	22.19**
Average item ratings	8.00**	23.47**	22.60**
Positive superiority effect			
Number of items	14.34**	33.05**	44.98**
Average item ratings	11.06**	82.43**	61.95**
Negative superiority effect			
Number of items	17.11**	0.03	10.23**
Average item ratings	8.69**	1.18	8.16**
Own relationship positivity			
Number of items	5.06*	13.26**	16.74**
Average item ratings	10.40**	37.03**	40.19**
Other relationships negativity			
Number of items	30.04**	6.06*	34.57**
Average item ratings	9.86**	10.28**	20.10**

NOTE: For all of the above analyses, Experiment 5 $df = 1, 39$ (2, 38 for three-level item object analyses); Experiment 6 $df = 1, 40$ (2, 38); combined data $df = 1, 79$ (2, 78).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

omy between the own-versus-other-relationships conditions. However, later in the results, we present the results of contrasts comparing all three item object conditions.

In support of Hypotheses 1 and 2 (as well as Hypotheses 3 and 4, discussed below), significant item valence by item object interactions were revealed for both measures (see Table 4, Item Valence × Item Object). Tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of positive superiority (see Table 4, Positive Superiority Effect). Within the positive item valence condition, own relationship items were more frequent and were rated more positively than were other relationships items (see Table 3). And consistent with Hypothesis 2, tests of simple effects revealed consistent evidence of negative superiority in Experiment 5 (see Table 4, Negative Superiority Effect). Within the negative item valence condition, own relationship items were significantly less frequent and were rated less negatively than were other relationships items (see Table 3). However, Hypothesis 2 was not supported in Experiment 6: The means were in the predicted direction for both measures, but neither effect was statistically significant. Thus—and consistent with the results of Experiments 1 through 4—subjects regarded their relationships as both better than and not as bad as

other relationships, although the latter effect was not significant in Experiment 6.

OWN RELATIONSHIP POSITIVITY AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS NEGATIVITY

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, tests of simple effects revealed evidence of own relationship positivity (see Table 4). In describing their own relationships, subjects listed a greater number of—and assigned more extreme ratings to—positive than negative beliefs (see Table 3). And in support of Hypothesis 4, tests of simple effects were consistent with the predicted other relationships negativity. In describing other relationships, subjects listed a greater number of negative than positive beliefs, and the extremity of their ratings was greater for negative than for positive beliefs. Thus—and consistent with the results of Experiments 1 through 4—positive beliefs dominated subjects' thoughts about their own relationships, whereas negative beliefs dominated thoughts about other individuals' relationships.

EFFECTS INVOLVING EXPERIMENT TYPE

Out of eight effects involving experiment type (four effects, two measures), four were statistically significant. Consistent with Experiments 1 through 4, the five-factor analyses revealed significant interactions of experiment type by item valence for both number of items and average ratings, Fs(2, 78) = 32.32 and 7.05, ps < .01. In the features-of-relationships study (Experiment 6), subjects listed significantly more positive than negative items, Ms = 2.24 versus 1.61, $F(2, 39) = 26.32$, $p < .01$, and rated positive items more extremely than negative items, Ms = 2.16 versus 1.68; $F(2, 39) = 11.40$, $p < .01$. In Experiment 5, this effect was reversed for number of items, Ms = 1.65 versus 1.93; $F(2, 38) = 9.19$, $p < .01$ and was virtually absent for average ratings, Ms = 1.86 versus 1.88. Also, there were significant interactions of experiment type by item object for both number of items and average item ratings, Fs(2, 78) = 15.72 and 5.47, ps < .01. Pairwise comparisons revealed that in the features-of-relationships study subjects listed a greater number of items for own-and-other relationships than for own relationships, Ms = 2.81 versus 1.91; $F(1, 43) = 13.00$, $p < .01$, which in turn was greater than the number for other relationships Ms = 1.91 versus 1.06; $F(1, 43) = 13.70$, $p < .01$. Moreover, other relationships items were given less extreme ratings than were items describing own or own-and-other relationships, Ms = 1.36 versus 2.19 and 2.22; Fs(1, 43) = 17.25 and 13.32, ps < .01. In Experiment 5, collapsing across levels of item valence, there were no significant differences among the item object categories, either for number or averaging ratings.

In contrast to Experiments 1 through 4, the five-factor analyses did not reveal significant interactions of experiment type by item valence by item object—neither for number nor for average ratings. However, in light of the significant three-factor interactions observed in Experiments 1 through 4, we examined interactions of experiment type with the simple effects tests representing our four hypotheses. These analyses revealed an interaction of experiment type by positive superiority for average item ratings, $F(1, 79) = 4.58$, $p < .05$; positive superiority was more pronounced in the features-of-relationships study (Experiment 6) than the response-to-dissatisfaction study (Experiment 5; see Table 4). The interaction of experiment type with both negative superiority and other relationships negativity was significant for number of items, Fs(1, 79) = 8.75 and 7.95, ps < .01, both effects being more pronounced in Experiment 5 than in Experiment 6 (see Table 4). Thus, although the overall analysis did not reveal significant three-factor interactions of experiment type by item valence by item object, there is some evidence that positive superiority was more prominent in the features-of-relationships study, whereas negative forms of superiority (i.e., negative superiority, other relationships negativity) were more pronounced in the response-to-dissatisfaction study.

OTHER EFFECTS

Finally, we examined the remaining effects involving subject sex and order of item valence (and their interactions with other variables). Out of a total of 48 remaining effects (24 effects, two measures), only 6 effects were significant or marginal.[2] Given that this number of significant findings could occur by chance—and given that the effects were scattered, inconsistent, and generally not observed in Experiments 1 through 4—these findings will not be discussed.

OWN RELATIONSHIP VERSUS OWN-AND-OTHER RELATIONSHIPS VERSUS OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, for exploratory purposes, we performed pairwise comparisons among the item object categories. In most instances, these analyses revealed that mean values for the own-and-other-relationships condition were intermediate between scores for the own relationship and other relationships conditions, yet somewhat more similar to the former than to the latter. This was true for both measures in Experiment 5 and for average item ratings in Experiment 6 (see Table 3, subscripts for means). Specifically, the own versus own-and-other contrast was not significant in any of these six cases, whereas the own-and-other versus other contrasts were significant in four of six instances. However, in Experiment 6 the pattern of comparisons for number of items differed somewhat. Consistent with the pattern noted above, more positive items were assigned to the own-and-other condition than to the other condition (this comparison was not significant for negative items). Inconsistent with the above pattern, for both the positive and negative

item valence conditions, subjects assigned significantly more items to the own-and-other condition than to the own condition.

Thus, in thinking about global features of relationships, a great many thoughts were assigned to the own-and-other relationships condition, although these thoughts were nonsignificantly less positive and more negative than the thoughts that applied uniquely to subjects' own relationships. More generally, subjects exhibited tendencies to (a) hold thoughts regarding their own relationships that were much like their thoughts regarding relationships in general (i.e., own items did not differ from own-and-other items), and (b) hold unique thoughts regarding other relationships that reflected poorly on this category (i.e., other relationships items generally were less positive and more negative than own or own-and-other items).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current work provides clear evidence in support of the claim that perceptions of superiority exist in the context of close relationships. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, all six studies revealed evidence of positive superiority: Individuals involved in ongoing dating relationships exhibited a greater number of positive thoughts regarding their own relationships than for others' relationships and rated qualities of their own relationships substantially more favorably than the qualities identified for others' relationships. Hypothesis 2 predicted the converse effect, termed negative superiority (this effect was observed for all studies except Experiment 6): Individuals reported fewer negative thoughts regarding their own relationships than for other relationships, and the negative qualities of their own relationships were rated as less undesirable (i.e., less extreme) than were those of other relationships. In parallel fashion, all six studies revealed evidence in support of Hypotheses 3 and 4: Positive beliefs dominated thoughts regarding own relationships (own relationship positivity), whereas negative beliefs dominated thoughts regarding others' relationships (other relationships negativity).

To provide a richer, more qualitative sense of our data, Table 5 presents a few verbatim items from Experiments 1 through 6. Evaluation of these items clearly is impressionistic, but it is worth noting that positive thoughts regarding own relationships tended to be exceptionally positive (e.g., "I give him a fair chance to explain if we have a disagreement"). In contrast, positive thoughts regarding other relationships frequently were less intensely positive, and sometimes were qualified ("They just go on as if nothing happened"). In parallel fashion, negative thoughts regarding own relationships often addressed relatively trivial matters or involved qualities that could be interpreted as either negative or positive (e.g., "My partner fills the ice trays the wrong way"; "My partner keeps things from me if he believes they will hurt me"). In contrast, negative thoughts about other relationships were fairly intensely negative (e.g., "Others may have physically or emotionally abusive relationships").

TABLE 5: Sample Items as a Function of Experiment Type, Item Valence, and Item Object, Experiments 1 Through 6

Experimental Condition
Positive item valence
Own relationship
I give him a fair chance to explain if we had a disagreement (Exp. 2)
My relationship is very fun—I enjoy just being with her (Exp. 3)
My partner deals well with my moods, good and bad (Exp. 4)
To directly and thoroughly discuss the problem at hand (Exp. 5)
To be able to honestly talk about each other's feelings (Exp. 6)
Own-and-other relationships
To start doing something completely new together (Exp. 5)
To show more interest in the partner's activities (Exp. 5)
Physical attraction (Exp. 6)
Feeling secure (Exp. 6)
Other relationships
They just go on as if nothing happened (Exp. 1)
Other people's relationships are consistent—less tumultuous (Exp. 3)
Other people's partners live closer to them (i.e., attending the same school) (Exp. 4)
To decide not to see each other for awhile to be able to think about the relationship (Exp. 5)
Negative item valence
Own relationship
I sometimes forget how much my partner really cares about me (Exp. 1)
When something is bothering me I don't always tell my partner (Exp. 2)
My partner fills the ice trays the wrong way (Exp. 3)
My partner keeps things from me if he believes they will hurt me (Exp. 4)
Own-and-other relationships
To not treat the partner equally, being too dominant or too submissive (Exp. 5)
Avoiding the problem for awhile (Exp. 5)
Family intervention (Exp. 6)
Spending time together seems to be a "must," even if the partner is in a bad mood (Exp. 6)
Other relationships
They blame each other instead of both taking the blame (Exp. 1)
They throw things (Exp. 2)
Other people's partners are incredibly dishonest (Exp. 3)
Others may have physically or emotionally abusive relationships (Exp. 4)
Dating other people (Exp. 6)

What underlying psychological mechanisms might account for these robust effects? First, our findings can be accounted for by differences in the amount and type of information individuals possess about their own and others' relationships, as well as by differences in the

processing of incoming information regarding relationships. In part, this line of reasoning rests on the assumption that people hold relatively favorable global beliefs about both their own and other relationships and, therefore, assign greater weight and attention to negative than to positive behaviors. Interestingly, the current research provided indirect support for the above characterization of human cognitive functioning (i.e., the global view is positive; for specific behaviors, negative behaviors and incidents are relatively available): When asked to describe relationships in a global, general manner, individuals' thoughts were moderately positive (i.e., the "world of relationships" is a benign one). (Such tendencies were most notable for beliefs describing own relationships.) In contrast, when individuals were induced to focus on relatively more specific, concrete behaviors and incidents, negative information appeared to be more available and retrievable. (Such tendencies were most notable for beliefs describing other relationships.) These findings are consistent with the notion that cognitive and social filters—as well as experience-based availability of information—may overshadow the negativity effect in the context of one's own relationship.

Second, the findings can be understood in terms of downward social comparison, or the tendency to compare one's own relationship to less fortunate relationships (Wills, 1991). Indeed, there was clear evidence of other relationships negativity, suggesting that subjects considered comparison relationships that were far more negative than positive. Subjects may have brought to mind not only actual comparison relationships but also imaginary examples of less fortunate relationships—relationships with which they might not have direct, personal experience (e.g., relationships with attributes such as "throwing things" or "physically and emotionally abusive"; see Table 5). Although downward comparison suggests voluntary processes, such negative images may come to mind in a fairly unintentional manner. For example, in thinking about negative features and behaviors, subjects may have focused primarily on other relationships and used these relationships as an anchor. Such an anchor may evoke images or stereotypes of particular subgroups of relationships that are largely negative; hence, subjects may unintentionally think of stereotypes regarding "problematic" relationships because such images form the best match for their negative beliefs (cf. "stereotype salience," Weinstein, 1980).

Third, some of our findings can be understood in terms of dimensional social comparison, or the tendency to focus selectively on attributes that make one's own relationship appear advantaged. Experiments 1 through 4 indicated that the observed relationship enhancement effects were somewhat more marked when subjects were free to describe whatever aspects of relationships they chose to address (i.e., in the features-of-relationships studies) than when subjects' choices were limited because a narrower domain was specified (i.e., in the response-to-dissatisfaction studies). This result is consistent with recent research indicating that superior beliefs about oneself are constrained by the specificity and objectivity of the dimensions on which these beliefs are held (e.g., Allison et al., 1989; Dunning et al., 1989). However, we did not observe stronger superiority effects in Experiment 6 (features) than in Experiment 5 (responses). This suggests that for global features subjects reserve positive thoughts for their own relationships and negative thoughts for other relationships, whereas such thoughts frequently apply to both own-and-other relationships.

We should note, however, that the above lines of reasoning are somewhat speculative and that further research is needed to examine directly the psychological mechanisms that underlie superiority effects in the context of close relationships. Also, future work should further establish the robustness of perceived superiority effects, particularly across different methods and different relationships (e.g., married couples). Moreover, although we obtained strong evidence for perceptions of superiority in the context of relationships—for men and women, American and Dutch samples, and across two domains—we do not mean to imply that such relationship-enhancing views are completely unconstrained. Indeed, our final two studies indicate that individuals tend to think that in many respects their relationships are not much different from others' relationships, particularly when making comparisons involving global features. Individuals think that their relationships are better than—and not as bad as—other relationships but otherwise may view their relationships as "perfectly normal."

NOTES

1. The analyses revealed main effects of subject sex for both number of items and average item rating, Fs(1, 71) = 8.67 and 6.23, ps < .01; women listed a greater number of items and assigned items more extreme ratings than men. Also, subject sex interacted with both negative superiority and other relationships negativity for number of items, Fs(1, 71) = 4.91 and 5.25, ps < .05. In comparison to men, women exhibited greater disparities between their own and other relationships, and exhibited greater disparities between number of positive and negative thoughts regarding other relationships. Thus women hold a greater number of thoughts regarding relationships than men, and this difference is especially pronounced for negative information regarding other relationships.

2. In light of the results from Experiments 1 through 4, the latter, marginally significant finding is of most interest—a three-factor interaction of subject sex by item valence by item object for number of items, $F(2, 78) = 2.78$, $p < .07$. This effect was significant in Experiment 6, $F(2, 39) = 4.71$, $p < .05$, but not in Experiment 5. In the features-of-relationships study (Experiment 6), women tended to exhibit greater perceived superiority than men; tests of simple effects revealed that the interaction with subject sex was marginally significant for negative superiority, $F(1, 40) = 2.87$, $p < .10$, and significant for other relationships negativity, $F(1, 40) = 5.97$, $p < .05$. In comparison to men, women exhibited greater disparities between their own and other relationships, and exhibited

greater disparities between number of positive and negative thoughts regarding other relationships. Thus, as observed in Experiments 1 through 4, Experiment 6 revealed some evidence that women in comparison to men hold a greater number of negative thoughts regarding other relationships.

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