

## Accessibility Experiences and Perceived Relationship Superiority

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## ABSTRACT

SHEVAUN L. STOCKER: Accessibility Experiences and Perceived Relationship Superiority

(Under the direction of Dr. Lawrence J. Sanna)

Similar to the positive illusion people demonstrate for themselves, people also have exaggeratedly positive views of their relationship. This *perceived superiority* encompasses the belief that one's relationship has more good features and fewer bad features than other people's relationships, and it plays a functional role in reducing doubt and sustaining conviction in relationships. This dissertation tests the role of accessibility experiences in influencing perceived superiority in close relationships. People can make judgments on the basis of two distinct factors: (a) *accessible content* (what information is brought to mind); and (b) *accessibility experience* (how easily information is brought to mind). Prior research on perceived superiority has focused only on the accessible content dimension, while completely neglecting the possibly critical influence of people's accessibility experiences. Three studies were designed to test the role of accessibility experience in perceived superiority. Study 1 ( $n = 154$ ) provided evidence that people find listing positive or negative thoughts about their own or others' relationships differently easy or difficult. Study 2 ( $n = 118$ ) further examined this issue by returning to the method of prior research by manipulating, within-subjects, the relationship target and valence variables. Study 3 ( $n = 198$ ) provided evidence that directly manipulating accessibility experience through a thoughts-listing task affects a variety of relationship variables.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this labor of love in honor of my mother. Her passion for life, compassion for others, graciousness, and stubborn tenacity to accomplish her goals inspire me daily. I can only hope to be half as productive in any given day as she was. I love you and miss you greatly.

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## CHAPTER 1

### ACCESSIBILITY EXPERIENCES AND PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP SUPERIORITY

The beliefs that people hold about themselves tend to be more positive than a completely objective view of the world can support. Research has identified at least three types of *positive illusion*: (a) people perceive themselves more positively than is objectively warranted; (b) believe that they possess more control over events than they actually possess; and (c) are unrealistically optimistic about the future (Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, when people are asked to describe how accurately positive and negative personality adjectives describe themselves and others, most evaluate themselves more favorably than they evaluate other people (e.g., Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Seginer & Somech, 2000; Toyama & Sakurai, 2000). There is a parallel phenomenon in close relationships: (a) people exhibit overly positive evaluations of their partners and relationships; (b) exaggerated belief in the controllability of their relationships; and (c) unrealistic optimism regarding the future of their relationships (e.g., Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Martz et al., 1998; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

In this dissertation, I examine the manner in which positive illusion in the form of perceived superiority is manifested in people's beliefs about their own and other's close relationships. Positive relationship illusion is defined in terms of *perceived superiority*, or "the inclination to regard one's own relationship as both better than and not as bad as other people's relationships" (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000, p. 521;

Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995, p. 32). A key underlying assumption is that individuals' feelings about their relationships are based not only on "objective qualities" of the involvement – that is, on the degree to which a given involvement gratifies the partners' most important needs – but also on the social context in which relationships are perceived (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). In short, relationships do not exist in a vacuum: A person's beliefs and feelings about his or her own relationship are shaped in part by their beliefs and feelings about other people's relationships.

Perceived superiority plays a functional role in reducing doubt and sustaining conviction in relationships (see Buunk, 2001; Buunk & van der Eijnden, 1997; Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). The primary goal of my dissertation is to test the role of accessibility experiences in influencing perceived superiority in close relationships. In this regard, two sources of information have been identified when making judgments: *accessible content* and *accessibility experience* (see Higgins, 1989; Schwarz, 1995; Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991). On the one hand, we may make judgments based on the content of our thoughts; that is, on the basis of what comes to mind, or accessible content. On the other hand, we may make judgments based on how easily thoughts come to mind; that is, on the basis of the subjective ease or difficulty of accessing thoughts, or accessibility experiences.

I suggest that the prior research on perceived superiority in research has only tapped the accessible content dimension, while completely neglecting the possibly critical influence of people's accessibility experiences. In Study 1, I tested the potential role of accessibility experience in this domain by assessing peoples' subjective experience of listing thoughts about relationships. People should find listing positive thoughts about their own relationship

and negative thoughts about others' relationship easier than listing negative thoughts about their own and positive thoughts about others' relationships. In Study 2, I replicated the traditional perceived superiority thoughts-listing task (where the target and valence dimensions are within-subject variables), while assessing the subjective accessibility experience of each thoughts-listing task. In Study 3, I manipulated the subjective accessibility experience directly (i.e., through a thoughts-listing task). Based upon pilot-testing, I chose listing 5 versus 25 thoughts. The goal of 5 thoughts is subjectively easy and the goal of 25 thoughts is subjectively difficult for people in this domain. That is, participants should rate their subjective experience of accessing thoughts as more difficult for the 25-thought condition and rate their subjective experience of accessing thoughts as easier in the 5-thought condition.

#### *Functional Value of Positive Illusion*

Numerous studies provide evidence of the benefits of positive illusion. Taylor and Brown (1988) conclude that: (a) self-enhancing perceptions indeed are exhibited, and (b) that such perceptions are a relatively common occurrence. These authors also conclude (c) that mentally healthy individuals have the capacity to distort reality in such a manner as to enhance self-esteem, maintain belief in their personal efficacy, and promote an optimistic view of the future. These three types of illusion are positively associated with traditional criteria for mental health, including the capacity to care about the self and others, the ability to be happy and contented, and the ability to engage in productive and creative work (e.g., Boyd-Wilson, Walkey, McClune, & Green, 2000; Toyama & Sakurai, 2000). The tendency toward realistic (and hence, relatively more negative) perceptions of the self is associated with depression, maladjustment, and other psychological problems. It therefore appears that

positive illusion may be especially adaptive when an individual receives negative self-relevant feedback or is otherwise psychologically threatened.

Of course, there may be limits to the benefits of positive illusion. Positive illusions may even be actively harmful when such tendencies are excessive (cf. Colvin & Block, 1994). Illusion that is completely out of touch with reality, believing too fervently that one can control one's outcomes, possessing truly excessive self-esteem, or being wildly optimistic about the future may be harmful to people. Overconfidence can breed fruitless persistence, over-commitment, and dangerous risk-taking. For example, people with exceptionally high self-esteem are more likely than those with moderate self-esteem to ride motorcycles without wearing helmets (Pelham, 1993). However, a moderate amount of positive illusion appears to be functional, particularly in situations in which people receive negative information about themselves (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Empirical studies in the relationship domain sought to examine the functional value of idealistic—as opposed to realistic—perceptions of close romantic partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b). On average, people regard their relationship partners more positively than their partners regard themselves. In addition, the tendency toward idealized images of a partner is positively associated with degree of satisfaction in a relationship. Moreover, over time in relationships, the more a partner idealizes the self, the more the person exhibits increasing self-esteem. That is, a partner's perceptions of the self tend to “become reality” over the course of extended time in a relationship. Thus, a certain amount of idealization may be a necessary preliminary feature of involvement in fulfilling dating relationships and marital relationships (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b).

Why might positive illusion serve a functional role in maintaining ongoing relationships? Relationships invariably suffer from periods of negativity, one or both persons may encounter desirable alternatives, and partners may engage in potentially destructive acts. Holding positive beliefs about a relationship may help partners resolve and recover from such relationship-threatening problems (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Maintaining positive beliefs about oneself and about one's relationship – feeling optimistic about the future and believing that one's relationship is better than most – may promote trust and security during challenging periods. By placing relationships in a favorable light, people may find it easier to sustain the energy needed to maintain a relationship, and may find that they rather automatically choose to remain with their partners “for better or worse,” even during the inevitable “worse” periods. Also, when we encounter potentially threatening information—for example, when a friend suffers a difficult period in her relationship, when we hear frightening statistics regarding high rates of divorce, or when our partners are not as affectionate as they once were—positive illusion may provide reassurance that our own relationships are relatively immune to such threats (Murray & Holmes, 1993). To counteract negative, threatening information, we may actively bring to mind ways in which our relationships are ideal (“My partner takes care not to talk to me in the morning until I've had my coffee”) or think about how much worse off other couples are (“Mary and John have always had a volatile relationship, with lots of conflict”).

#### *Accessibility Experience and Accessible Content*

But is it *what* we bring to mind or how *easily* we bring thoughts to mind that matters? Although this has not yet been tested within the area of close relationships, the importance of making such distinctions is borne out by numerous other studies. Ease of retrieval has been

assessed in a number of circumstances. Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) availability heuristic holds that we form judgments of frequency, likelihood and typicality on the basis of the ease with which examples can be brought to mind. More recent research has shown that people's accessibility experiences are related to the hindsight bias (Sanna, Schwarz & Stocker, 2002; Sanna & Schwarz, 2003), political attitudes (Haddock, 2002), perceptions of risk (Loewenstein, Weber, & Hsee, 2001), and confidence in the accuracy of our self-knowledge (Kelley & Lindsay, 1993).

Accessibility experience functions such that thoughts or examples that are brought to mind easily are considered more likely or probable than those that are difficult to bring to mind, similar to what has been observed for other types of experiential information, such as moods (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1983) or arousal (Zillman, 1978). To demonstrate the influence of the accessibility, Tversky and Kahneman (1973) asked subjects to judge whether there are more words in English that begin with the letter *k* or more words that contain *k* as the third letter. In actuality, the English language contains many more words with *k* as the third letter than as the first. Yet out of 152 subjects, 105 guessed it to be the other way around. The reason for this disparity is that it's easier to bring to mind words that start with *k*, so these are judged as more common. However, on the basis of this study and other similar ones, it is difficult to determine whether it is accessible content or accessibility experiences that matter. For instance, is it how many words beginning with the letter *k* in the first versus third position that mattered (accessible content) or was it how easily words with the letter *k* come to mind that mattered (accessibility experience)?

To test the role of accessibility experience versus accessible content more explicitly, Schwarz and colleagues asked participants to recall either 6 (an easy number to list) or 12 (a

difficult number to list) assertive or nonassertive behaviors (Schwarz et al., 1991). They then asked participants a number of items designed to assess participants' self-reported assertiveness. They found that those participants asked to list 6 assertive behaviors judged themselves as more assertive than those asked to list 12 assertive behaviors. However, the reverse was true for the nonassertive condition—those participants asked to list 12 nonassertive behaviors judged themselves as more assertive than those asked to list 6 nonassertive behaviors. This occurred despite the fact that twice as many thoughts about nonassertiveness were listed. Thus, judgments were not made on the basis of the content alone, but rather on the ease or difficulty with which thoughts came to mind.

Accessibility experiences also have similar effects in other domains, such as with the hindsight bias (Sanna, Schwarz, & Stocker, 2002). The hindsight bias is a tendency for people to “tend to view what has happened as having been inevitable” (Fischhoff, 1982a, p. 428), after knowing what that outcome is. Prior research has shown that one way to reduce the hindsight bias is to have people think about alternatives to the known outcomes or events (Fischhoff, 1982b). Building on this idea, Sanna et al. (2002) asked participants to list either 2 or 10 thoughts about how an event might have turned out otherwise. Those participants instructed to list 10 alternative outcomes experienced the task as subjectively difficult, whereas those participants instructed to list 2 alternative outcomes experienced the task as subjectively easy. There was more hindsight bias in the 10- than 2-thought alternative conditions, supporting the role of accessibility experiences. In other words, if only thought content mattered, there should have been *less* hindsight bias when thinking about 10 than 2 alternatives, but in fact the opposite occurred.

Previous research on perceived superiority has also utilized thoughts-listing tasks for assessment (see Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Participants are asked to list positive or negative features that are more characteristic of either their own or others' relationships. However, no distinctions are ever made between accessibility experience and accessible content. Thus, research on perceived superiority is likely missing a critical component. In assessing the characteristics of and making judgments about our relationships, are we relying on *what* comes to mind or how *easily* it comes to mind? Is it more important that we can think of a number of good things about our relationship, or that it was easy for us to do so?

When faced with making a decision, a common tool used in determining whether to pick an alternative is to brainstorm and make a list of the pros and cons of that alternative. This can be used for any decision – which college to go to, whether to get a desktop or laptop – but it can also be used in determining whether one should stay in a relationship. This technique consists of listing as many positive or negative features of the alternative (in this case, the relationship partner). The decision is then based on which column has more items in it – are there more advantages or disadvantages to being with the current relationship partner? What this technique neglects to take into account, however, is that while one column might have more items than the other, the experience of listing those thoughts might suggest a different solution. There may, objectively, be more positive than negative features listed (which would indicate that one should stay with the current partner) but if it was more difficult to list the positive features rather than the negative features, that might indicate that the best solution would be to end the relationship.



Prior research on perceived superiority has assumed, in only measuring accessible content, that that is the sole factor affecting our overall beliefs about our relationships. My view is that we can make more accurate predictions about people's perceived superiority in relationships by also knowing people's accessibility experiences. My three proposed studies were thus designed to examine the potentially critical role of accessibility experience.

### *Overview of Current Research*

Although prior work has examined the role of accessible content in shaping tendencies toward perceived superiority (Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995), no existing research has yet examined the role of the subjective accessibility experience in shaping this phenomenon. I suggest that assessing the potential role of accessibility experience will enhance our understanding of the perceived superiority phenomenon.

This general line of reasoning will be examined in the three studies that I conducted in this dissertation. In Study 1, participants will engage in a modified perceived superiority task, asking them to list either positive or negative characteristics for either their own relationship or for others' relationships. I will assess participants' subjective ease for the thoughts-listing task. This first study is crucial in determining whether participants find the different tasks to be subjectively easier or more difficult. This will also later provide key information for Study 3, specifically numbers of thoughts to be used for the accessibility experience manipulation. Building on Study 1, in Study 2, I will replicate the traditional perceived superiority thoughts-listing task but will also assess the subjective accessibility experience. With the use of the traditional task, the target and valence of thoughts will be manipulated within-subjects variables. Participants will be asked to list thoughts about either their own or others' relationships (starting each thought with a target indicator such as

“My partner is...” or “Other peoples’ relationships are...”). This replication and extension further connects my dissertation to prior research on perceived superiority in romantic relationships.

In Study 3, participants will engage in a thoughts-listing task, in an attempt to directly manipulate accessibility experiences. Three between-subject variables will be manipulated: ease (5 thoughts vs. 25 thoughts), target (own vs. others’ relationships), and valence (positive vs. negative thoughts). This direct manipulation of subjective accessibility experience will further strengthen my argument for the influence of accessibility experiences in perceived relationship superiority. In all three studies, participants will also complete instruments designed to assess relationship commitment, satisfaction, adjustment, investment, inclusion of the other in the self, and level of alternatives (to the relationship). These will be related to participants’ subjective accessibility experiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### STUDY 1

In an initial study, participants listed thoughts (positive or negative characteristics) of either their own relationship or others' relationships. This first study is critical in determining whether participants find listing thoughts subjectively easier or more difficult. If perceived superiority is influenced by accessibility experience, and not just accessible content, participants should find the thoughts-listings to differ in their ease or difficulty. This will provide initial support for my ideas. In addition, this will later provide a basis for directly manipulating subjective accessibility experience in Study 3. Participants engaged in a thoughts-listing task, writing whatever thoughts came to mind during this exercise. They then reported their subjective level of ease or difficulty for the thoughts-listing task. Finally, participants completed instruments tapping commitment, satisfaction, dyadic adjustment, inclusion of other in the self, investment, and level of alternatives (to the relationship). The design of Study 1 was a 2 (target: own vs. other) X 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) ANOVA between-subjects factorial design. The key predictions for the study are:

Hypothesis 1: (a) Participants will list greater numbers of positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship and list greater numbers of negative rather than positive thoughts about others' relationships; and (b) participants will list greater numbers of positive thoughts about their own relationship than about others' relationships and list greater numbers of negative thoughts of others' relationships than about their own relationship.

Hypothesis 2: (a) Participants will find it subjectively easier to list positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship and find it subjectively easier to list negative than positive thoughts about others' relationships; and (b) participants will find it subjectively easier to list positive thoughts about

their own relationship than others' relationships and find it subjectively easier to list negative thoughts about others' relationships than for their own relationship.

Hypothesis 3: (a) Participants who find it easier to list positive than negative thoughts about their own relationships should exhibit increased commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, inclusion of the other in the self, and a lower level of alternatives (to the relationship); and (b) participants who find it easier to list negative than positive thoughts about others' relationships should exhibit increased commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, inclusion of the other in the self, and a lower level of alternatives (to the relationship).

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

One hundred and fifty-nine undergraduates (113 women, 46 men) volunteered to take part in the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The web-based recruitment procedure listed the following requirement for participation: "To participate, you must be currently involved in a dating relationship of at least three months in duration." Participants took part in the study in mixed-sex groups ranging in size from 6 to 30 persons. Across sessions, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. Two individuals failed to properly complete the thoughts-listing task by which target of thought (own relationship vs. others' relationships) and valence of thought (positive vs. negative) was manipulated; their data was dropped from the analyses. An additional three participants admitted that they were not actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships; their data, too, was dropped from the analyses.

Thus, usable data were obtained for 154 participants (110 women, 44 men). Participants were 18.84 years old on average, most were freshmen or sophomores (55% freshmen, 26% sophomores, 16% juniors, and 3% seniors) and most were Caucasian (12%

African American, 3% Asian American, 79% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 3% other).

Participants' relationships were an average of 15.44 months in duration; most described their relationship as steady dating relationships (1% engaged, 77% dating steadily, 13% dating regularly, 8% dating casually, and 1% friendships) and indicated that neither they nor their partners dated others (92% said neither partner dated others, 2% said that either they or their partners dated others, and 6% said both partners dated others).

### *Manipulation Checks*

*Comprehension Check.* To ensure that participants comprehended the manipulations, they were asked to answer two questions regarding the experimental procedure (see Appendix E): to indicate the instructions regarding the target and valence of their thoughts-listing task. For target, participants were asked to indicate whether they had been asked to list thoughts about their own relationship or others' relationships (and responded by checking either '*List thoughts regarding other peoples' relationships*' or '*List thoughts regarding my romantic relationships*'). For valence, participants were asked to indicate whether they had been asked to list positive or negative thoughts [and responded by checking either *Positive (good, desirable)* or *Negative (bad, undesirable)*].

*Involvement Check.* To ensure that participants were actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships, I asked that participants answer two final questions (see Appendix E), assuring them that they would receive full credit for participation irrespective of their answers. I asked that participants indicate (by checking either *yes* or *no*) whether they were, in fact, in an ongoing romantic relationship and to indicate (by checking either *not at all*, *somewhat*, or *completely*) the level of accuracy of their information.

### *Thoughts-listing Task*

Following the collection of demographic information, participants were given materials for the thoughts-listing task (see Appendix B). The experimenter reviewed the instructions for the task and introduced one of four instructional sets (own relationship vs. others' relationships; positive vs. negative). Participants in the own relationship/positive condition read the following instructions (instructions for participants in the own/negative condition listed in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are good (bad) or desirable (undesirable). Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, "My relationship is..." or "My partner is..." and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind. If you need more space, please continue on the back of this sheet.

In contrast, participants in the others' relationships/positive condition read the following instructions (instructions for participants in the other/negative condition listed in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list thoughts about features of other people's romantic relationships and their partners that are good (bad) or desirable (undesirable). Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, "Other people's relationships are..." or "Their partners are..." and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind. If you need more space, please continue on the back of this sheet.

Participants were given 10 minutes to list thoughts regarding their own or others' relationships on a lined worksheet, with the above instructions at the top. The number of thoughts was then recorded.

### *Subjective Ease of Thoughts-listing Task*

Accessibility experience was assessed with two items asking participants to rate the ease and difficulty of the task on an 11-point scale (see Appendix C), with instructions for participants in the others' relationships conditions in parentheses (e.g., "To what degree did you find it easy to list thoughts about your relationship (others' relationships)?"; 0 = *not at all easy* and 10 = *very easy*; and "To what degree did you find it difficult to list thoughts about your relationship (others' relationships)?"; 0 = *not at all difficult* and 10 = *very difficult*). The difficult item was reverse-scored and was averaged with the easy item to create a single ease score for each participant ( $r = .87$ ).

### *Relationship-Relevant Measures*

*Commitment.* Commitment was assessed using a 15-item, modified version of the commitment level subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; e.g., "I am completely committed to maintaining our relationship"; "I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship [for example, I imagine life with my partner decades from now]"; -6 = *do not agree at all*, 0 = *agree somewhat*, 6 = *agree completely*). Items were reverse-scored where appropriate, and were averaged to create a single commitment level score for each participant ( $\alpha = .95$ ). For all relationship scales, see Appendix D.

*Satisfaction level.* Satisfaction level was assessed using the ten-item satisfaction level subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"; "Our relationship is close to ideal"; -6 = *do not agree at all*, 0 = *agree somewhat*, 6 = *agree completely*). Items were reverse-scored where appropriate, and were averaged to create a single satisfaction level score for each participant ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Investment Scale.* Investment level was assessed using the ten-item investment level subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; e.g., “I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end.”; “I feel very involved in our relationship – like I have put a great deal into it.”; -6 = *do not agree at all*, 0 = *agree somewhat*, 6 = *agree completely*). Items were reverse-scored where appropriate, and were averaged to create a single satisfaction level score for each participant ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Alternatives Scale.* Alternative level was assessed using the ten-item alternative level subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998; e.g., “If I weren’t dating my partner, I would do fine – I would find another appealing person to date.”; “My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship.”; -6 = *do not agree at all*, 0 = *agree somewhat*, 6 = *agree completely*). Items were reverse-scored where appropriate, and were averaged to create a single satisfaction level score for each participant ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Dyadic adjustment.* Couple well-being was assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). This 30-item instrument includes dichotomous, five-point, six-point, and seven-point items tapping aspects of couple well-being such as agreement, intimacy, sexuality, shared interests, and conflict resolution (e.g., “How often do you and your partner laugh together?”; 0 = *never*, 5 = *more than twice a day*; “Please circle the dot that best describes the degree of happiness – all things considered – of your relationship”; 0 = *extremely unhappy*, 6 = *perfect*). Items were reverse-scored where appropriate, and were added to create a single measure of dyadic adjustment for each participant ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Inclusion of other in the self.* The degree of self-other overlap will be assessed using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) – a single-item,



pictorial measure that purports to tap closeness. The scale includes seven Venn diagrams, one circle representing the “self” and the other circle representing the “other.” The seven diagrams vary in degree of self-other overlap. The participant is asked to circle the diagram that best describes his or her relationship. To the degree that a participant selects a diagram with greater self-other overlap, there is argued to be greater closeness between the partners. The pictorial depictions are assigned numerical scores (*1 = the diagram with greatest self-other distance, 7 = the diagram with least self-other distance*).

### *Procedure*

The experiment was described as a study of attitudes and behavior in close relationships. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, the experimenter distributed a questionnaire designed to obtain demographic information (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, and the length and status of their present romantic relationships. Participants then completed the thoughts-listing task. At the end of the 10-minute thoughts-listing task, the experimenter distributed questionnaires that included items designed to assess comprehension of the experimental manipulation, to assess the subjective ease or difficulty of the task, to obtain measures of relationship-relevant constructs (commitment level, satisfaction level, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of other in the self), and manipulation checks (for the both relationship status and thoughts-listing task instructions). At the end of the session, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their assistance.

### *Results*

A series of 2 (target: own vs. other) by 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effect of target and valence on the number

of thoughts listed, the subjective ease of the thoughts-listing task, and the relationship-relevant variables<sup>1</sup>.

### *Comprehension Checks*

All participants correctly reported their target and valence condition. However, during coding of the thoughts-listing task, it was noted that two participants failed to complete the thoughts-listing task correctly (they listed positive features about their own relationship when they had been instructed to list negative features). As noted earlier, the data for the participants who did not complete the thoughts-listing task correctly was dropped from the analyses. All remaining analyses are based on data from the 154 participants for whom valid data were obtained.

### *Involvement Checks*

To ensure that participants indeed were involved in ongoing dating relationships, I administered an “involvement check” questionnaire. Of the original 159 participants, 98% indicated that they were in fact involved in ongoing dating relationships. Most participants reported that their responses to questionnaires represented accurate and honest descriptions of their relationships (95% completely accurate, 4% somewhat accurate, and 1% not at all accurate). Responses to involvement check items did not differ significantly as a function of target or valence. As noted earlier, the data for participants who were not involved in ongoing romantic relationships were dropped from the analyses. All remaining analyses are based on data from the 154 participants for whom valid data were obtained.

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<sup>1</sup> For Studies 1 and 3, regression analysis was conducted to test the main effect of gender, as well as the interaction of gender with target or valence on subjective ease. Neither the main effect nor the interactions were significant (all  $ps > .05$ ). For Study 2, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted, again with no significant main effect nor interactions of gender with target or valence on subjective ease.

### *Number of Thoughts*

People should list greater numbers of positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship, and greater numbers of negative than positive thoughts about others' relationships. There was a significant main effect of target,  $F(1, 152) = 6.49, p < .05$ , such that participants listed more thoughts about others' relationships than about their own ( $M = 31.24$  and  $M = 26.87$ , respectively). There was also a significant main effect for valence,  $F(1, 152) = 46.05, p < .01$ , such that participants listed more positive than negative thoughts ( $M = 34.76$  and  $M = 23.55$ , respectively). Importantly, the predicted interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 151) = 21.33, p < .01$  (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations).

Supporting Hypothesis 1a, within the own relationship condition, participants listed significantly more positive than negative thoughts, simple effect  $F(1, 80) = 80.69, p < .01$ ; however, within the other relationships condition, the number of positive and negative thoughts listed were not significantly different from each other (see Figure 1). Supporting Hypothesis 1b, within the negative condition, participants listed significantly more negative thoughts about others' relationships than about their own relationships, simple effect  $F(1, 76) = 27.39, p < .01$ ; however, within the positive condition, the number of thoughts listed for own relationship and others' relationships were not significantly different from each other.

### *Subjective Ease of Thoughts-listing Task*

People should find it easier to list positive rather than negative thoughts about their own relationship and also find it easier to list negative rather than positive thoughts about others' relationships. There was a significant main effect of valence,  $F(1, 152) = 10.75, p < .01$ , such that participants found it harder to list negative thoughts and easier to list positive thoughts, and a predicted interaction,  $F(1, 152) = 9.19, p < .01$ . Participants reported the

listing of positive thoughts as easier than listing negative thoughts about their own relationship and reported the listing of negative thoughts as easier than listing positive thoughts about others' relationships.

Supporting Hypothesis 2a, within the own relationship condition, participants reported that it was significantly easier to list positive than negative thoughts, simple effect  $F(1, 80) = 24.06, p < .01$ ; however, within the others' relationships condition, participants' subjective ease for the positive and negative conditions were not significantly different from each other (see Figure 2). Supporting Hypothesis 2b, within the positive condition, participants reported that it was significantly easier to list positive thoughts about their own relationship than others' relationships, simple effect  $F(1, 78) = 8.32, p < .05$ ; however, within the negative condition, participants' subjective ease for listing thoughts about their own and others' relationships was not significantly different from each other.

#### *Relationship-Relevant Variables*

The number of thoughts listed was significantly correlated with several relationship variables (see Table 2). In partial support of Hypothesis 3, several significant relationships were observed (see Table 3) between subjective ease and the relationship-relevant variables, above and beyond the effect of the number of thoughts listed. Participants in the own/positive condition reported negative correlations between subjective ease and commitment, satisfaction and IOS. Thus, the easier it was to list positive features about their relationship, the higher the reported levels of commitment, satisfaction and IOS. These relationships between subjective ease and commitment, satisfaction, and self-other overlap hold, even when controlling for the number of thoughts listed ( $p < .05$  for all three partial correlations).

Participants in the other/positive condition reported negative correlations between subjective ease and commitment, satisfaction, and dyadic adjustment. Thus, the easier it was to list positive features of others' relationships, the higher the reported levels of commitment, satisfaction, and adjustment in their own relationship. These relationships between subjective ease and commitment, satisfaction, and self-other overlap hold, even when controlling for the number of thoughts listed ( $p < .05$ , for all three partial correlations).

### *Discussion*

Study 1 demonstrated that people list thoughts that are relationship enhancing. In particular, people list more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship, more positive thoughts about their own than about others' relationships, and more negative thoughts about others' relationships than about their own relationship.

Moreover, and more importantly, participants reported that listing negative thoughts about one's own relationship was significantly more difficult than listing positive thoughts about one's own relationship. They also reported listing positive thoughts about their own relationship as easier than listing positive thoughts about others' relationships. This provides clear initial support for my main hypotheses. One qualification to note is that even participants listing negative thoughts about their own and positive thoughts about others' relationships failed to find those tasks to be exceedingly difficult; that is, mean subjective ease scores for those two conditions are 4.09 and 3.15, respectively, along an eleven-point scale (ranging from 0 to 10).

In short, the findings of Study 1 demonstrate that participants follow the predicted patterns for the number of thoughts listed and the subjective experience of the thoughts-listing task. The fact that participants find the thoughts-listing tasks to differ in their

difficulty (as directly noted by the subjective ease scores and, indirectly, through the numbers of thoughts listed) indicates that accessibility experience may play a role in perceived superiority research, and thus it is a neglected factor that may be critical to this area. Subjective ease and numbers of thoughts listed were also correlated with several relationship variables. Building on this, in Study 2 I will provide another test using a procedure that replicates the traditional perceived superiority thoughts-listing to provide further strength to this argument.

## CHAPTER 3

### STUDY 2

Study 1 was important because it demonstrated that participants experience the thoughts-listing tasks (along both the own vs. other and positive vs. negative dimensions) in significantly different ways. People list more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship, more positive thoughts about their own than about others' relationships, and more negative thoughts about others' relationships than about their own relationship. More importantly, they report listing negative than positive thoughts about one's own relationship as more difficult. They also report listing positive thoughts about their own relationship as easier than listing positive thoughts about others' relationships. Specifically, Study 2 was designed to assess the subjective accessibility experience while following more closely the designs of prior research, in which target and valence are within-subject variables (see Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Despite this change in method, my predictions were similar to Study 1:

Hypothesis 4: (a) For own relationships, when positive thoughts are easy to bring to mind or negative thoughts are difficult to bring to mind, participants should report greater commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, IOS, and lower levels of alternatives (to the relationship); and (b) for others' relationships, when negative thoughts are easy to bring to mind or positive thoughts are difficult to bring to mind, participants should report greater commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, IOS, and lower levels of alternatives (to the relationship).

## *Method*

### *Participants*

One hundred and twenty-one undergraduates (66 women, 55 men) volunteered to take part in the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The web-based recruitment procedure listed the following requirement for participation: “To participate, you must be currently involved in a dating relationship of at least three months in duration.” Participants took part in the study in mixed-sex groups ranging in size from approximately 8 to 20 persons. Three participants admitted that they were not actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships; their data were dropped from the analyses.

Thus, usable data were obtained from 118 participants (65 women, 53 men). Participants were 19.28 years old on average, most were freshman or sophomores (63% freshmen, 23% sophomores, 7% juniors, and 7% seniors) and most were Caucasian (21% African American, 4% Asian American, 68% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, and 4% Other). Participants’ relationships were an average of 14.67 months in duration; most described their relationship as steady dating relationships (1% engaged, 78% dating steadily, 14% dating regularly, and 7% dating casually) and indicated that neither they nor their partner dated others (94% said neither partner dated others, 2% said that either they or their partner dated others, and 4% said both partners dated others).

### *Thoughts-listing Tasks*

Following the collection of demographic information, participants were given materials for the thoughts-listing tasks (see Appendix F). The experimenter then reviewed the instructions for the task and introduced one of four instructional sets (own vs. other;



positive vs. negative). Participants completing the own/positive task read the following instructions (instructions for the own/negative condition in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are **good (bad)** or **desirable (undesirable)**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, “My relationship is...,” or “My partner is...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind. Please continue on the back of this page if you need more space.

In contrast, participants completing the other/positive task read the following instructions (instructions for the other/negative condition in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list thoughts about features of other people’s romantic relationships and their partners that are **good (bad)** or **desirable (undesirable)**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, “Other people’s relationships are...,” or “Their partners are...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind. Please continue on the back of this page if you need more space.

Participants were given 10 minutes for each task; the order in which they list positive and negative features for their own and others’ relationships was counterbalanced across participants. Trained undergraduate research assistants later scored participants’ lists, recording the number of positive and negative thoughts listed for own relationship and for others’ relationships.

#### *Subjective Ease of Thoughts-listing Task*

Accessibility experience was assessed by having participants rate the ease or difficulty of listing each thought on a 11-point scale (see Appendix G), with the instructions asking participants to “rate the degree to which it was easy or difficult for you to list each thought” where -5 = *very difficult* and 5 = *very easy*. Ease scores were averaged for each thoughts-listing task.

### *Relationship-Relevant Measures*

The relationship-relevant measures used were identical to those used in Study 1 (see Appendix D). Thus, commitment, satisfaction, investments, level of alternatives, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of the other in the self were assessed for each participant. Alpha levels for each scale were similar to levels reported in Study 1.

*Involvement Check.* To ensure that participants were actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships, I asked that participants answer two final questions (see Appendix E), assuring them that they would receive full credit for participation irrespective of their answers. I asked that participants indicate (by checking either *yes* or *no*) whether they were, in fact, in an ongoing romantic relationship and to indicate (by checking either *not at all*, *somewhat*, or *completely*) the level of accuracy of their information.

### *Procedure*

The experiment was described as a study of attitudes and behavior in close relationships. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, the experimenter distributed a questionnaire designed to obtain demographic information (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, and the length and status of their present romantic relationships. Participants then completed the first thoughts-listing task. At the end of the 10-minute thoughts-listing task, participants rated the ease or difficulty of listing each thought. The experimenter then distributed the second thoughts-listing task and provided participants with ten minutes to complete it. Participants then completed a second subjective ease rating. This procedure was followed for the third and fourth thoughts-listing tasks and the subsequent subject ease rating of listing each thought. The experimenter then distributed questionnaires designed to obtain measures of

relationship-relevant constructs (commitment level, satisfaction level, investment level, level of alternatives, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of other in the self). At the end of the session, participants were then fully debriefed and thanked for their assistance.

### *Results*

A series of 2 (target: own vs. other) X 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) within-subject ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effect of target and valence on the number of thoughts listed, the subjective ease of the thoughts-listing task, and the relationship-relevant variables. A comparison on all dependent variables for an effect of order (of thoughts-listing task) found no significant effect.

### *Involvement Checks*

To ensure that participants indeed were involved in ongoing dating relationships, I administered an “involvement check” questionnaire. Of the original 121 participants, 98% indicated that they were in fact involved in ongoing dating relationships. Most participants reported that their responses to questionnaires represented accurate and honest descriptions of their relationships (95% completely accurate, 3% somewhat accurate, and 2% not at all accurate). Responses to involvement check items did not differ significantly as a function of target or valence. As noted earlier, the data for three participants who were not involved in ongoing romantic relationships were dropped from the analyses. All remaining analyses are based on data from the 118 participants for whom valid data were obtained.

### *Number of Thoughts*

Participants should list more positive thoughts and fewer negative thoughts about their own relationship and fewer positive and more negative thoughts about others' relationships. There was a significant main effect of target,  $F(1, 116) = 9.73, p < .01$ , such

that participants listed more thoughts about their own than about others' relationships ( $M = 12.9$  and  $M = 11.55$ , respectively). There was also a significant main effect of valence,  $F(1, 116) = 86.91, p < .01$ , such that participants listed more positive than negative thoughts ( $M = 13.02$  and  $M = 10.53$ , respectively). Importantly, the predicted interaction was also significant  $F(1, 116) = 143.13, p < .01$ , (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations).

Within the own relationship condition, participants listed significantly more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship, simple effect  $t = 13.26, p < .01$  (see Figure 3). Participants listed significantly more positive thoughts for their own than for others' relationships, simple effect  $t = 10.79, p < .01$ . Participants also listed significantly more negative than positive thoughts for others' relationships, simple effect  $t = 2.40, p < .05$ . And participants listed significantly more negative thoughts for others' relationships than for their own relationship, simple effect  $t = 5.11, p < .01$ .

### *Subjective Ease*

Participants should find it easier to list positive rather than negative thoughts about their own relationship and also find it easier to list negative rather than positive thoughts about others' relationships. There was a significant main effect of target,  $F(1, 116) = 7.68, p < .01$ , such that participants found listing thoughts about their own relationship easier than listing thoughts about others' relationships ( $M = 2.57$  and  $M = 2.21$ , respectively). There was also a significant main effect of valence,  $F(1, 116) = 30.58, p < .01$ , such that participants found listing positive thoughts to be easier than listing negative thoughts ( $M = 2.83$  and  $M = 1.95$ , respectively). Importantly, the predicted interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 116) = 37.13, p < .01$ .

Within the own relationship condition, participants found listing positive rather than negative thoughts about their own relationship to be significantly easier, simple effect  $t = 8.27, p < .01$  (see Figure 4). Participants found listing positive thoughts about their own relationship to be significantly easier than listing positive thoughts about others' relationships,  $t = 6.99, p < .01$ . And participants found listing negative thoughts about others' relationships to be significantly easier than listing negative thoughts about their own relationship,  $t = 2.22, p < .05$ .

#### *Relationship-Relevant Variables*

Replicating the results from Study 1, the number of thoughts listed was significantly correlated with several relationship variables (see Table 5). In partial support of Hypothesis 4, several significant relationships were observed (see Table 6) between subjective ease and the relationship-relevant variables, above and beyond the effect of the number of thoughts listed. Participants in the own/positive condition reported negative correlations between subjective ease and commitment, satisfaction and dyadic adjustment. Thus, the easier it was to list positive features about their relationship, the higher the reported levels of commitment, satisfaction and relationship adjustment. These relationships hold, even when controlling for the number of thoughts listed ( $p < .05$  for all three partial correlations).

#### *Discussion*

The findings of Study 2 verified that people list more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship and more negative than positive thoughts about others' relationships. More importantly, people experience these thoughts-listing tasks differently – participants find listing positive features rather than negative features of their own relationship as easier while listing negative rather than positive features of others'

relationships is experienced as easier. Of note, these accessibility experience findings were demonstrated within the domain of the traditional within-subject thoughts-listing task of prior perceived relationship superiority methodology. And, as in Study 1, the subjective experience of listing thoughts were significantly correlated with several relationship-relevant variables, while controlling for the number of thoughts listed.

Studies 1 and 2 were important in demonstrating that people experience the subjective ease or difficulty of the thoughts-listing task differently, depending on the target and valence of the task. Because of this, an additional test of the role of accessibility experience in perceived superiority is needed. To do this, I added a direct manipulation of subjective accessibility experience.

## CHAPTER 4

### STUDY 3

The main purpose of Study 3 is to extend the earlier findings by directly manipulating accessibility experiences versus thought content. Study 3 allows for the direct manipulation of the ease or difficulty of thoughts-listing by asking subjects to list either 5 or 25 thoughts. The 5 or 25-thought numbers were determined from the numbers of thoughts that participants naturally listed in Study 1. The lower bound was determined by taking one standard deviation below the lowest mean number of thoughts listed from Study 1 (the own/negative condition). The upper bound was determined by taking one standard deviation above the highest mean number of thoughts listed from Study 1 (the own/positive condition).

The main design of Study 3 was a 2 (thoughts-listing: 5 vs. 25) X 2 (target: own vs. other) X 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects factorial design. Key predictions were:

Hypothesis 5: (a) For own relationships, when positive thoughts are easy to bring to mind or negative thoughts are difficult to bring to mind, participants should report greater commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, IOS, and lower levels of alternatives (to the relationship); and (b) for others' relationships, when negative thoughts are easy to bring to mind or positive thoughts are difficult to bring to mind, participants should report greater commitment, satisfaction, investment, dyadic adjustment, IOS, and lower levels of alternatives (to the relationship).

## *Method*

### *Participants*

Two hundred and four undergraduates (155 women, 49 men) volunteered to take part in the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The web-based recruitment procedure listed the following requirement for participation: “To participate, you must be currently involved in a dating relationship of at least three months in duration.” Participants took part in the study in mixed-sex groups ranging in size from 8 to 20 persons. Across sessions, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. One individual failed to properly complete the thoughts-listing task by which target of thought (own relationship vs. others’ relationships) and valence of thought (positive vs. negative) was manipulated; their data were dropped from the analyses. An additional five participants admitted that they were not actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships; their data, too, were dropped from the analyses.

Thus, usable data were obtained for 198 participants (150 women, 48 men). Participants were 18.9 years old on average, most were freshmen or sophomores (55% freshmen, 32% sophomores, 8% juniors, and 5% seniors) and most were Caucasian (8% African American, 3% Asian American, 84% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, and 3% other). Participants’ relationships were an average of 14.89 months in duration; most described their relationship as steady dating relationships (2% engaged, 76% dating steadily, 12% dating regularly, and 10% dating casually) and indicated that neither they nor their partners dated others (93% said neither partner dated others, 2% said that either they or their partners dated others, and 5% said both partners dated others).



### *Manipulation Checks*

*Comprehension Check.* To ensure that participants comprehended the manipulations, they were asked to answer two questions regarding the experimental procedure (see Appendix E): to indicate the instructions regarding the target and valence of their thoughts-listing task. For target, participants were asked to indicate whether they had been asked to list thoughts about their own relationship or others' relationships (by checking either '*List thoughts regarding other peoples' relationships*' or '*List thoughts regarding my romantic relationships*'). For valence, participants were asked whether they had been asked to list positive or negative thoughts [by checking either *Positive (good, desirable)* or *Negative (bad, undesirable)*].

*Involvement Check.* To ensure that participants were actually involved in ongoing romantic relationships, we asked that participants answer two final questions (see Appendix E), assuring them that they would receive full credit for participation irrespective of their answers. We asked that participants indicate (by checking either *yes* or *no*) whether they were, in fact, in an ongoing romantic relationship and to indicate (by checking either *not at all*, *somewhat*, or *completely*) the level of accuracy of their information.

### *Thoughts-listing Task*

Following the collection of demographic information, participants were given materials for the thoughts-listing task (see Appendix H). The experimenter reviewed the instructions for the task and introduced one of eight instructional sets (easy vs. difficult; own relationship vs. others' relationships; positive vs. negative). Participants in the easy/own relationship/positive condition read the following instructions (instructions for participants in the easy/own relationship/negative condition listed in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are good (bad) or desirable (undesirable). Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, “My relationship is...,” or “My partner is...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

In contrast, participants in the easy/others’ relationships/positive condition read the following instructions (instructions for participants in the easy/ others’ relationships/ negative condition listed in parentheses):

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of other people’s romantic relationships and their partners that are good (bad) or desirable (undesirable). Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, “Other people’s relationships are...,” or “Their partners are...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

For the easy thoughts condition, participants were instructed, both verbally and through the written instructions, to list 5 thoughts (as well as having 5 numbered lines present on the thoughts-listing task paperwork). For the difficult conditions, this was changed to 25 (both for the verbal and written instructions and the number of numbered lines listed). Participants were given 10 minutes to list thoughts regarding their own or others’ relationships. The number of thoughts was recorded.

#### *Subjective Ease of Thoughts-listing Task*

Accessibility experience was assessed with two items asking participants to rate the ease and difficulty of the task on an 11-point scale (see Appendix C), with instructions for participants in the other relationships conditions in parentheses (e.g., “To what degree did you find it easy to list thoughts about your relationship (others’ relationships)?”; 0 = *not at all easy* and 10 = *very easy*; and “To what degree did you find it difficult to list thoughts about your relationship (others’ relationships)?”; 0 = *not at all difficult* and 10 = *very*

*difficult*). The difficult item was reverse-scored and was averaged with the easy item to create a single ease score for each participant ( $r = .95$ ).

### *Relationship-Relevant Measures*

The relationship-relevant measures used in Study 3 were identical to those used in Study 1 (see Appendix D). Thus, commitment, satisfaction, investments, level of alternatives, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of the other in the self were assessed for each participant. Alpha levels for each scale were similar to levels reported in Study 1.

### *Procedure*

The experiment was described as a study of attitudes and behavior in close relationships. After obtaining informed consent from each participant, the experimenter distributed a questionnaire designed to obtain demographic information (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, and the length and status of their present romantic relationships. Participants then completed the thoughts-listing task. At the end of the 10-minute thoughts-listing task, the experimenter distributed questionnaires that included items designed to assess comprehension of the experimental manipulation, to assess the subjective ease or difficulty of the task, to obtain measures of relationship-relevant constructs (commitment level, satisfaction level, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of other in the self), and manipulation checks (for both the thoughts-listing task instructions and relationship status). At the end of the session, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their assistance.

### *Results*

A 2 (thoughts-listing: 5 vs. 25) by 2 (target: own vs. other) by 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects multivariate ANOVA was conducted to test the effect of target,

valence, and difficulty of the task on the number of thoughts listed, the subjective ease of the thoughts-listing task, and the relationship-relevant variables.

### *Comprehension Checks*

In addition to examining participants' thought lists to ensure that they indeed followed the instructions, I also asked participants to answer two "comprehension check" questions. All participants correctly reported their target and valence conditions. However, during coding of the thoughts-listing task, it was noted that one participant failed to complete the thoughts-listing task correctly (they listed positive features about their own relationship when they had been instructed to list negative features). As noted earlier, the data for the participant who did not complete the thoughts-listing task correctly was dropped from the analyses. All remaining analyses are based on data from the 198 participants for whom valid data were obtained.

### *Involvement Checks*

To ensure that participants indeed were involved in ongoing dating relationships, I administered an "involvement check" questionnaire. Of the original 204 participants, 98% indicated that they were in fact involved in ongoing dating relationships. Most participants reported that their responses to questionnaires represented accurate and honest descriptions of their relationships (95% completely accurate, 3% somewhat accurate, and 2% not at all accurate). Responses to involvement check items did not differ significantly as a function of thoughts-listing goal, target, or valence. As noted earlier, the data for three participants who were not involved in ongoing romantic relationships were dropped from the analyses. All remaining analyses are based on data from the 198 participants for whom valid data were obtained.

### *Number of Thoughts*

In support of Hypothesis 4, participants in the five thoughts condition listed an average of five thoughts ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ). In the 25-thoughts condition, participants listed an average of 20.77 thoughts ( $SD = 5.28$ ).<sup>2</sup> See Table 5 for means and standard deviations.

### *Subjective Ease of Thoughts-listing Task*

As anticipated, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for thoughts-listing,  $F(1, 186) = 6.38$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that participants found the 25-thought listing task significantly more difficult ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 2.51$ ) than the 5-thought listing task ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 2.54$ ).

There was also a main effect for valence,  $F(1, 186) = 25.97$ ,  $p < .01$ , qualified by a target by valence interaction,  $F(1, 186) = 58.79$ ,  $p < .01$  (see Figure 6). For own relationships, participants found listing positive ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) rather than negative ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ) thoughts about their own relationship as significantly easier, simple effect  $F(1, 70) = 76.93$ ,  $p < .01$ . Participants also found listing positive ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) thoughts about their own relationship easier than listing positive thoughts about others' relationships ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ),  $F(1, 66) = 35.06$ ,  $p < .01$ , and listing negative ( $M = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ) thoughts about their own relationship more difficult than listing negative thoughts about others' relationships ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 2.26$ ;  $F(1, 66) = 17.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### *Relationship-Relevant Variables*

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<sup>2</sup> Because the standard deviations in the 5-thought condition are zero, an ANOVA is not appropriate. But looking at just the 25-thought condition, there was a target by valence interaction,  $F(1, 63) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .05$ . Participants listed significantly more positive ( $M = 23.11$ ,  $SD = 3.36$ ) than negative thoughts ( $M = 15.71$ ,  $SD = 7.39$ ),  $F(1, 34) = 19.91$ ,  $p < .01$  about their own relationship. Participants also listed significantly more negative thoughts about others' relationships ( $M = 20.0$ ,  $SD = 4.44$ ) than about their own relationship ( $M = 15.71$ ,  $SD = 7.39$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 6.31$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Figure 5). The possible implications of this will be described later in the General Discussion.

In support of Hypothesis 5, the three-way interaction of subjective ease, target, and valence of the thoughts-listing task was significant for several of the relationship variables. As can be seen in Figure 7, with regards to reported levels of commitment, the pattern obtained for the 5-thought condition differed from that obtained for the 25-thought condition ( $F(1, 186) = 7.87, p < .01$ ). The target by valence interaction was significant for the 5-thought condition,  $F(1, 88) = 4.44, p < .05$ , but not for the 25-thought condition. There was also the three-way interaction for satisfaction (see Figure 8),  $F(1, 186) = 4.54, p < .05$ . The target by valence interaction was significant for the 5-thought condition,  $F(1, 88) = 3.94, p < .01$ , but not for the 25-thought condition. As shown in Figure 9, the pattern obtained for dyadic adjustment for the 5-thought condition differed from the pattern obtained for the 25-thought condition,  $F(1, 186) = 3.88, p < .05$ . Again, the target by valence interaction was significant for the 5-thought condition but not for the 25-thought condition,  $F(1, 88) = 3.96, p < .05$ . There was also the predicted three-way interaction for self-other overlap (see Figure 10),  $F(1, 186) = 8.88, p < .01$ . The target by valence interaction was significant for the 5-thought condition,  $F(1, 88) = 5.27, p < .05$ , but not for the 25-thought condition.

### *Discussion*

By manipulating accessibility experiences versus thought content directly, Study 3 provides further evidence that subjective accessibility experience is an influential factor in perceived relationship superiority. Listing five thoughts was seen as easier, whereas listing 25 thoughts was seen as more difficult. However, there was also an interaction between subjective accessibility experiences and target and valence. Participants found listing positive rather than negative thoughts about their own relationship easier and participants

found listing negative thoughts about their own relationship more difficult than listing negative thoughts about others' relationships.

In the 25-thought listing condition, the pattern of results from Study 1 was replicated, with regards to the number of thoughts listed. In the difficult condition, participants listed more positive than negative thoughts about their own relationship and more negative thoughts about others' relationships than about their own relationship.

There was also an effect of manipulating accessibility experience and target and valence on the relationship-relevant variables. The pattern of relationship assessment varied, by target and valence, depending on the accessibility experience (whether participants had been instructed to list 5 or 25 thoughts). In general, the highest levels of commitment, satisfaction, adjustment, and self-other overlap were reported when positive thoughts about one's own relationship and negative thoughts about others' relationships were easy to list, as well as when negative thoughts about one's own relationship and positive thoughts about others' relationships were difficult to list. This supports the findings from Studies 1 and 2 but extends them in a very critical manner – in Study 3, the accessibility experience was manipulated.

Direct manipulation of accessibility experience led to significant effects in the numbers of thoughts listed, the subjective experience of the thoughts-listing task, and ratings of the relationship that were relationship-enhancing. However, the predictions were not entirely supported—the main effect of thoughts-listing was present, but qualified by a target by valence interaction for subjective ease and number of thoughts listed (for the 25-thought condition, see Footnote 1).

## CHAPTER 5

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prior research on perceived superiority in romantic relationships has neglected a critical variable – accessibility experience. The implications of this are far-reaching. It is not just *what* people think about that matters, but how *easily* thoughts about good and bad features of our own and others’ relationships come to mind that matters. In fact, accessibility experiences function with regard to perceived superiority in a manner that is similar to how it functions with other cognitive mechanisms (see Kelley & Lindsay, 1993; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001; Sanna & Schwarz, 2003; Sanna, Schwarz & Stocker, 2002). Study 1 provided evidence that participants experience the tasks of listing positive or negative thoughts about their own or others’ relationships differently in terms of their subjective accessibility experience. Study 2 further examined this issue by having the target and valence variables be within-subject variables. Study 3 was important because direct manipulation of the accessibility experience affected the number of thoughts listed, the subjective experience of the thoughts-listing task, and assessments of the relationship. People in the 5-thought condition listed fewer thoughts than in the 25-thought condition and found listing five thoughts to be easier than listing 25 thoughts. Also, the pattern of findings for several of the relationship-relevant variables differed depending on whether participants were asked to list 5 or 25 thoughts.

Across all three studies, the findings for the effect of subjective accessibility experience on the relationship relevant-variables were strongest for the own relationship



conditions. That is, what seems to matter most for participants is the experience of thinking about their own relationship, rather than the experience of thinking of others' relationships. Research by Wilson and Ross (2000) on temporal and social comparison supports this finding. They found that when participants were focused on self-enhancement goals, they were more likely to report utilizing temporal, rather than social, comparison as the mechanism for evaluating their abilities or progress (see also Albert, 1977 and Wayment & Taylor, 1995). The argument could be made that people might be motivated to view their relationship positively, and thus, be in a relationship-enhancement frame of mind when asked to think about and list thoughts for their own (or others') relationship. This goal might then explain the stronger effect of accessibility experience in the own relationship thoughts-listing tasks on the relationship-relevant measures (commitment, satisfaction, investment, alternatives, dyadic adjustment, and inclusion of the other in the self).

The current studies also provide insight into other work on perceived superiority. Previous research has simply assessed the number of thoughts listed by participants about their own and others' relationships and simply created difference scores (see Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; Rusbult et al., 2000) to determine whether perceived superiority occurs. The current research demonstrates that subjective accessibility experience, above and beyond the effect of the number of thoughts listed, impacts reported levels of commitment, satisfaction, and self-other overlap. Thus, more than just how many thoughts are listed, researchers need to take into account the experience of thinking of and listing thoughts about one's own and others' relationships.

### *Future Research*

Extensions of the current research should explore other aspects of accessibility experience, that is, other methods for assessing the experience of the thoughts-listing task. The current assessment was direct and apparent – participants were asked to rate the ease or difficulty of the thoughts-listing task, either as a whole or by thought. A more indirect option might be to record the latency of listing thoughts (through a computer-based system). Thus, rather than having the participant rate the experience of listing thoughts, tracking the length of time it took to list each thought might also provide insight into the ease or difficulty of the task (controlling for the length of each thought, in words). Using an indirect measure of accessibility experience might better reflect the role of accessibility experience in actuality – the way it influences judgments in a non-experimental setting.

A second possible extension involves incorporating the degree of confidence one has in the thoughts listed, as a possible mediator in further determining the role of accessibility experience in affecting our relationship judgments. Petty, Briñol, and Tormala (2002) have demonstrated that confidence in one's thoughts conversely effects later persuasion, depending on the valence of thoughts. Participants were subjected to a persuasive message and were then asked to list four thoughts about the consequences of the persuasive message. They then rated their thoughts as positive, neutral, or negative and rated their confidence in the validity of each thought and the likelihood of the consequences they had listed. Results demonstrated that when participants were more confident in the positive consequences they listed, they were more persuaded. However, the reverse was true for the negative consequences. The more confident participants were in the negative consequences they listed, the less persuaded they were by the message. In further exploring the role of

accessibility experience in influencing relationship judgments, it may be important to note the confidence that people have in their thoughts about their own (or others') relationship. Listing a few positive thoughts about one's relationship may be easy (which would bolster feelings of commitment, satisfaction, etc.) and it may lead to feeling more confident in those features that are listed, while the reverse could be true for listing many positive features. That is, the finding that listing a few positive features about one's relationship leads to higher levels of commitment and satisfaction might be explained by the increased confidence one has in those positive features. Thus, confidence could be a potential mediator in the accessibility experience and subsequent judgment link.

It is unclear in these studies just who the participant is 'using' in listing thoughts about others' relationships. Would accessibility experience have more of an influence on how we evaluate our relationship if we were thinking about our parent's relationship, rather than about the average UNC student's romantic relationship? While not directly addressed in the current studies, other work has examined the effect of target of thought on thoughts-listing tasks (Stocker & Rusbult, unpublished manuscript). In a set of two studies, participants were asked to list counterfactual thoughts about either their own or others' relationships. In the first study, participants in the other-relationship condition were asked to list counterfactual thoughts about any relationship (i.e., their friends and their partners, their parents, their siblings and their partners, etc.). In the second study, participants were asked to list counterfactual thoughts about a close friends' relationship (and to identify this person by their initials, as they were to make social comparison ratings later in the study to this relationship). The target of thought (any other relationship vs. a close friend's relationship) did not influence the type of counterfactual thoughts (upward or downward), their extremity

(participants were asked to rate each thought from -3 to +3), or the degree of influence that listing counterfactual thoughts had on current evaluations of one's own relationship. Thus, it is likely that just *who* participants are thinking of, when listing thoughts about others' relationships, may not influence the impact of accessing those thoughts on relationship measures.

A final concern is that of whether the quality of the thoughts being listed might decrease over time – that is, as participants continue in the task, they might be listing less and less powerful thoughts. Quality of thought might then be an important mediator in the relationship between accessibility experience and relationship judgments. While participants in the current research were not asked to rate the quality of the thoughts being listed (just the accessibility experience of listing the thoughts), other research indicates that participants don't necessarily come up with weaker and weaker items in order to complete the task (Schwarz et al., 1991). In Study 2, participants were asked to list 6 or 12 assertive or nonassertive behaviors. Independent coders then rated the representativeness of the last two thoughts on a 10-point scale (where 1 = *very unassertive* and 11 = *very assertive*). Results indicated that the quality of the thoughts (as indicated by how well they represent the target category – either assertive or unassertive) did not decrease as the number of thoughts increased. This evidence demonstrates that it is unlikely that participants were simply trying to 'complete the task' by providing less extreme examples, though future research on the role of accessibility experience in thinking about our relationships could explore this further.

### *Conclusion*

The three studies together help to enlighten not only what is known about perceived superiority in relationships, but also what is known about subjective accessibility

experiences as well. The current studies demonstrate that accessibility experience, in thinking about our relationship, does in fact influence the judgments we make about our relationship, above and beyond the affect of the number of thoughts. This demonstrates that what is more important than being able to list a large number of positive features of one's relationship is that this is an *easy* thing to do.

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Table 1

Study 1: Mean Values of Number of Thoughts, Subjective Ease, Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.

		<u>Own Relationship</u>		<u>Other Relationship</u>	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Number of Thoughts	<i>M</i>	18.18	8.69	16.58	14.66
	<i>SD</i>	5.06	4.49	5.36	5.56
Subjective Ease	<i>M</i>	1.89	4.09	3.15	3.27
	<i>SD</i>	1.74	2.24	2.03	2.43
Commitment	<i>M</i>	1.31	2.09	2.53	1.94
	<i>SD</i>	2.49	2.21	2.38	2.67
Satisfaction	<i>M</i>	3.62	3.59	3.53	3.83
	<i>SD</i>	1.24	1.12	1.20	0.96
Investments	<i>M</i>	2.33	2.61	2.84	2.58
	<i>SD</i>	1.24	1.16	1.37	1.19
Alternatives	<i>M</i>	1.24	1.0	1.09	1.11
	<i>SD</i>	1.59	1.46	1.43	1.55
Dyadic Adjustment	<i>M</i>	134.54	132.69	133.14	139.46
	<i>SD</i>	11.71	16.06	14.08	13.09
IOS	<i>M</i>	4.54	4.77	4.83	4.63
	<i>SD</i>	1.29	1.21	1.23	1.39

Table 2

Study 1: Correlational Analysis of Number of Thoughts with Subjective Ease, Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment, and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self.

	<i>Number of Thoughts</i>			
	<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>	
	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>
Subjective Ease	-.27	-.19	-.24	-.18
Commitment	.34*	.02	.18	-.06
Satisfaction	.47**	.004	.05	.06
Investments	.33*	.13	.13	-.14
Alternatives	-.16	.57**	-.32*	-.21
Dyadic Adjustment	.33*	-.19	.13	.21
IOS	.43**	.01	.11	-.19

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Table 3

Study 1: Partial Correlations of Subjective Ease with Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment, and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self, Controlling for Number of Thoughts.

	<i>Subjective Ease</i>			
	<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>	
	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>
Commitment	-.36*	.03	-.32*	-.18
Satisfaction	-.32*	.24	-.37*	-.04
Investments	-.18	.09	-.15	-.05
Alternatives	.23	-.26	.23	.26
Dyadic Adjustment	-.25	.19	-.44**	.13
IOS	-.32*	.02	-.21	.005

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Table 4

Study 2: Mean Values of Number of Thoughts and Subjective Ease by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task and Mean Values of Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self.

		<u>Own Relationship</u>		<u>Other Relationship</u>	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Number of Thoughts	<i>M</i>	16.82	8.98	11.02	12.07
	<i>SD</i>	5.80	4.88	6.09	5.47
Subjective Ease	<i>M</i>	3.39	1.75	2.26	2.16
	<i>SD</i>	1.14	1.92	1.69	1.93
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Commitment		1.75	2.52		
Satisfaction		3.64	1.07		
Investments		2.58	1.38		
Alternatives		1.15	1.61		
Dyadic Adjustment		128.99	10.71		
IOS		4.91	1.24		

Table 5

Study 2: Correlational Analysis of Number of Thoughts with Subjective Ease, Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment, and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self.

	<i>Number of Thoughts</i>			
	<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>	
	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>
Subjective Ease				
Own/Positive	.09	-.39**	-.21*	-.18
Own/Negative	-.19*	-.1	-.24**	-.27**
Other/Positive	-.02	-.29**	.2*	.12
Other/Negative	-.05	-.06	-.07	-.05
Commitment	.25**	-.21*	-.02	.04
Satisfaction	.28**	-.39**	-.02	.10
Investments	.08	-.12	-.02	-.01
Alternatives	-.07	.19*	-.03	-.02
Dyadic Adjustment	.21*	-.42**	.07	-.03
IOS	.15	-.15	-.03	.04

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

Table 6

Study 2: Correlational Analysis of Subjective Ease with Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment, and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self, Controlling for the Number of Thoughts.

	<i>Subjective Ease</i>			
	<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>	
	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>	<i>Pos.</i>	<i>Neg.</i>
Commitment	.22*	-.01	.04	.03
Satisfaction	.33**	-.04	.18	.04
Investments	.12	-.02	.06	.12
Alternatives	-.12	.002	.06	.02
Dyadic Adjustment	.35**	-.01	.05	.11
IOS	.14	-.04	.1	.16

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

Table 7

Study 3: Mean Values of Number of Thoughts, Subjective Ease, Commitment, Satisfaction, Investments, Alternatives, Dyadic Adjustment and Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self by Thought Condition, Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.

		<i>5-Thoughts (Easy)</i>				<i>25-Thoughts (Difficult)</i>			
		<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>		<i>Own Relationship</i>		<i>Others' Relationships</i>	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Number of Thoughts	<i>M</i>	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	23.11	15.71	22.50	20.0
	<i>SD</i>	0	0	0	0	3.36	7.39	2.88	4.44
Subjective Ease	<i>M</i>	1.55	5.55	4.20	3.35	2.20	5.98	5.13	4.41
	<i>SD</i>	1.49	2.17	2.39	2.32	1.51	2.47	1.97	2.67
Commitment	<i>M</i>	1.62	0.26	1.30	2.22	1.49	2.37	2.34	1.30
	<i>SD</i>	2.69	3.09	2.48	2.65	2.62	2.49	1.97	2.67
Satisfaction	<i>M</i>	3.68	2.75	3.46	3.63	3.43	3.69	3.57	3.21
	<i>SD</i>	0.88	1.89	1.51	1.21	1.46	1.40	1.06	1.62
Investments	<i>M</i>	2.47	1.52	2.44	2.29	2.35	2.96	2.46	2.30
	<i>SD</i>	1.35	1.96	1.75	1.19	1.39	1.60	1.29	1.16
Alternatives	<i>M</i>	1.55	1.19	0.89	1.27	0.99	0.39	0.89	1.26
	<i>SD</i>	1.73	1.80	1.4	1.69	1.54	2.10	1.62	1.62
Dyadic Adjustment	<i>M</i>	131.24	128.43	132.68	135.56	131.81	135.58	136.0	128.83
	<i>SD</i>	13.86	18.36	13.69	12.43	17.88	14.80	9.89	15.81
IOS	<i>M</i>	4.82	4.14	4.08	4.67	4.54	4.79	4.83	3.96
	<i>SD</i>	1.31	1.68	1.38	1.21	1.14	1.41	1.30	1.63

NOTE: Number of Thoughts = actual number of thoughts listed by participant (range: 3 to 25). For all other variables, ranges are: Subjective Ease (0 to 10), Commitment (-6 to +6), Satisfaction (-6 to +6), Investments (-6 to +6), Alternatives (-6 to +6), Dyadic Adjustment (31 to 135), and IOS (1 to 7).



Figure 1

Study 1: Mean Number of Thoughts by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.

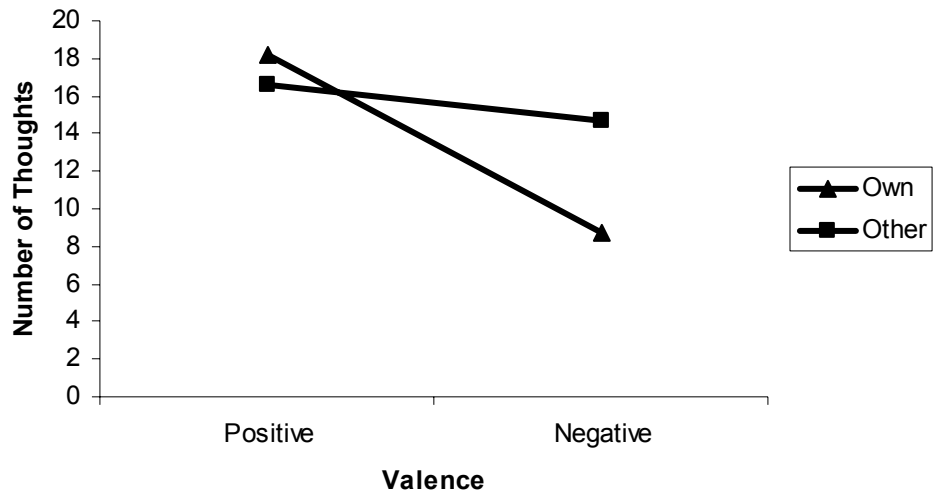
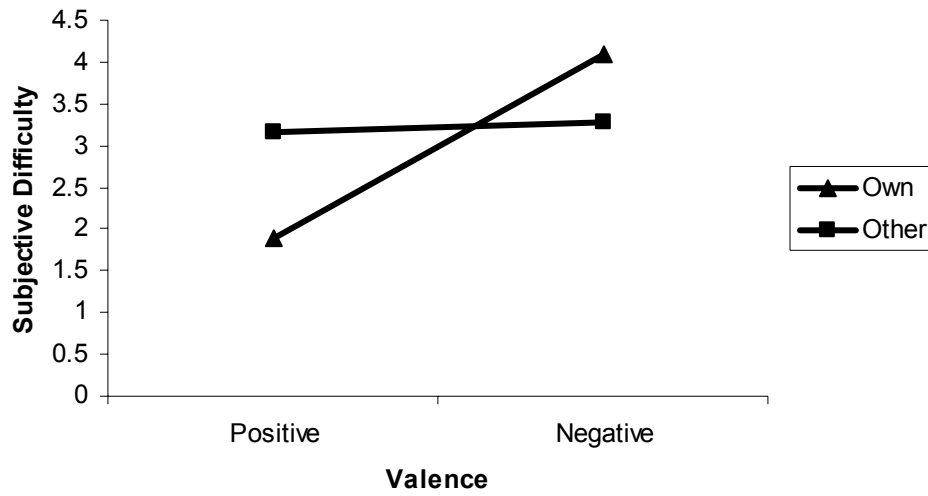


Figure 2

Study 1: Mean Subjective Ease by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.



*Note:* Subjective difficulty is an average of two items; higher values indicate greater difficulty.

Figure 3

Study 2: Mean Number of Thoughts by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.

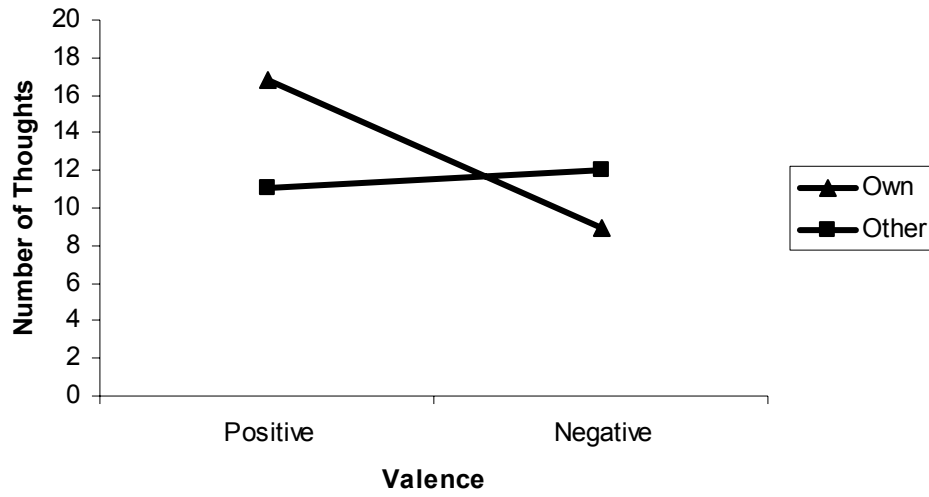
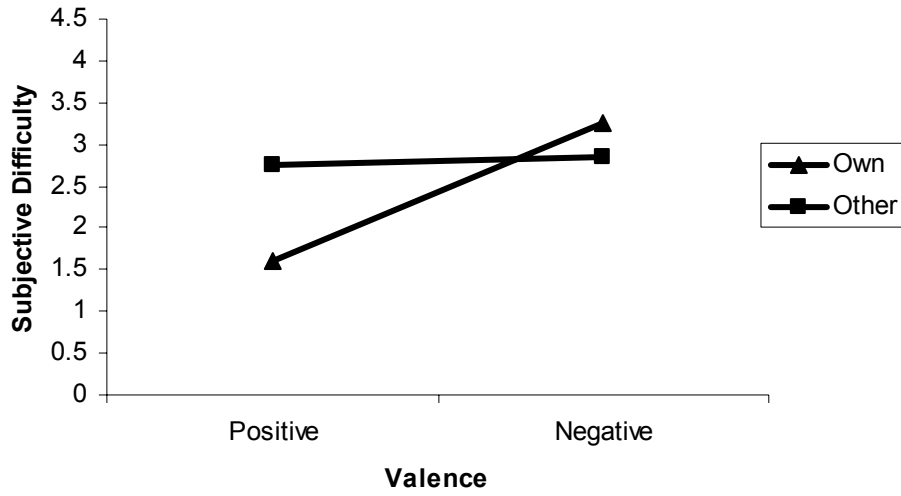


Figure 4

Study 2: Mean Subjective Ease by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.



*Note:* Subjective difficulty scores were provided for each thought; higher values indicate more difficulty.

Figure 5

Study 3: Mean Number of Thoughts by Target and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task for the Difficult Condition.

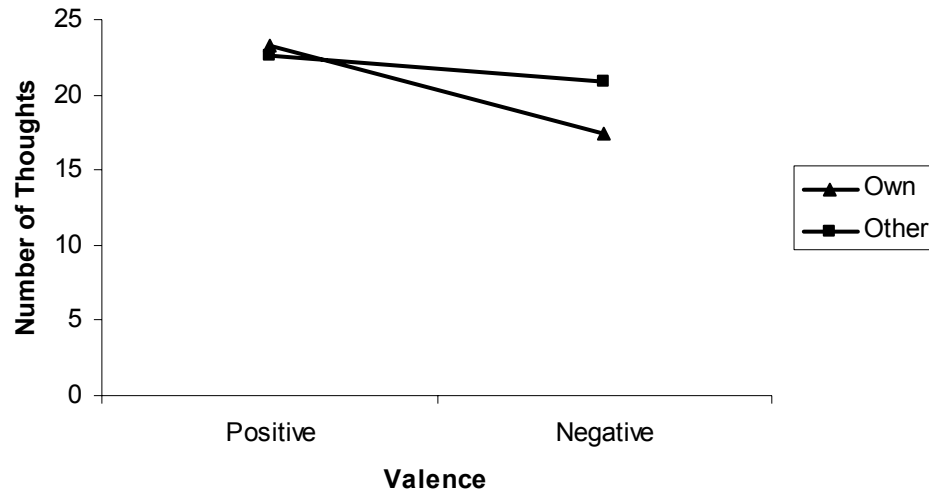


Figure 6

Study 3: Mean Subjective Ease by Thought Condition, Target, and Valence of Thoughts-listing Task.

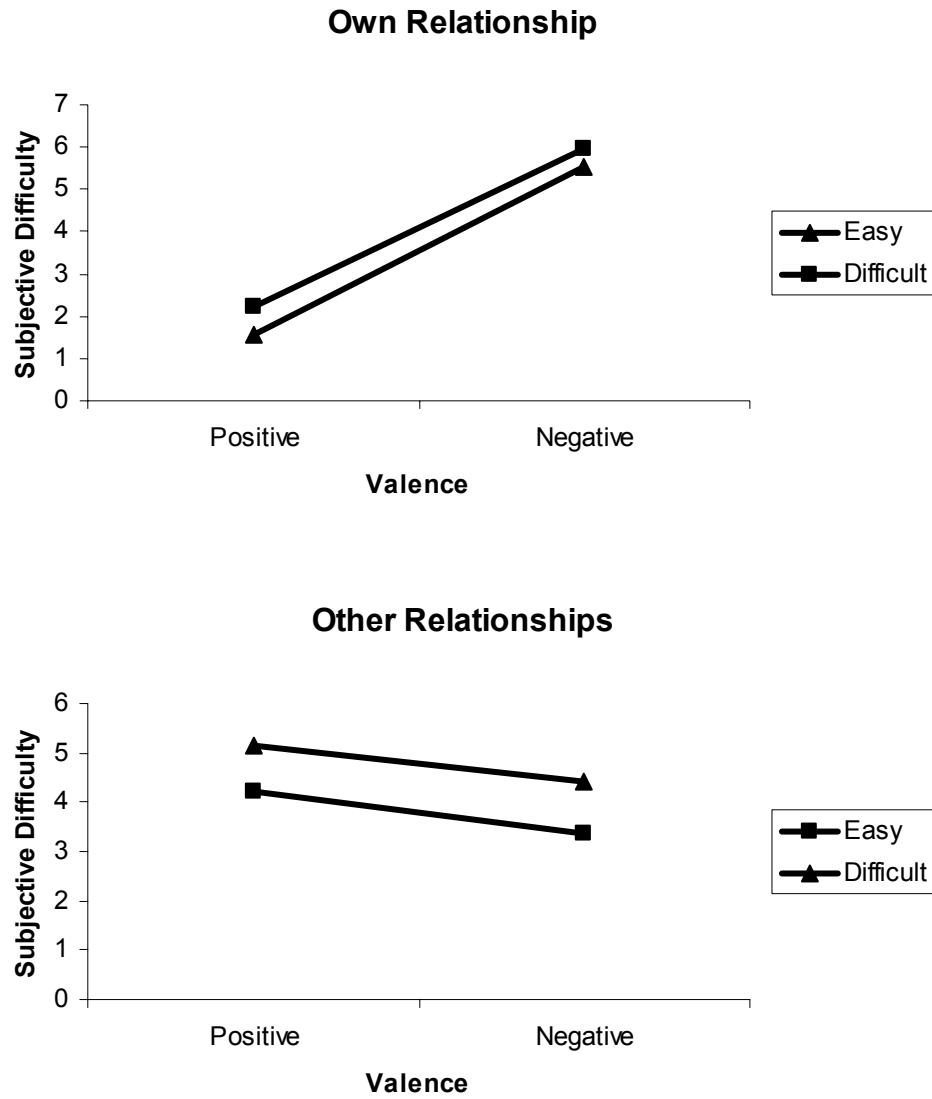


Figure 7

Study 3: Mean Commitment by Thought Condition, Target, and Valence and Goal of Thoughts-listing Task.

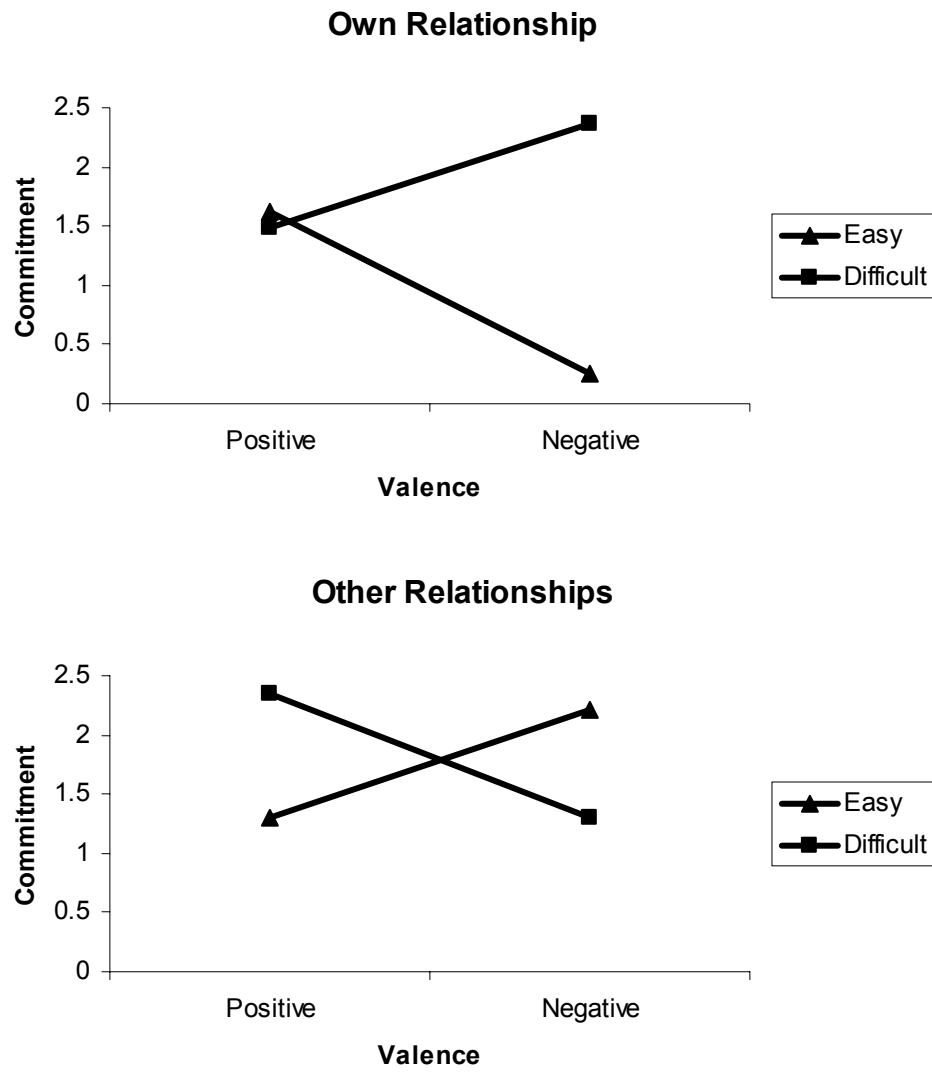


Figure 8

Study 3: Mean Satisfaction by Thought Condition, Target, and Valence and Goal of Thoughts-listing Task.

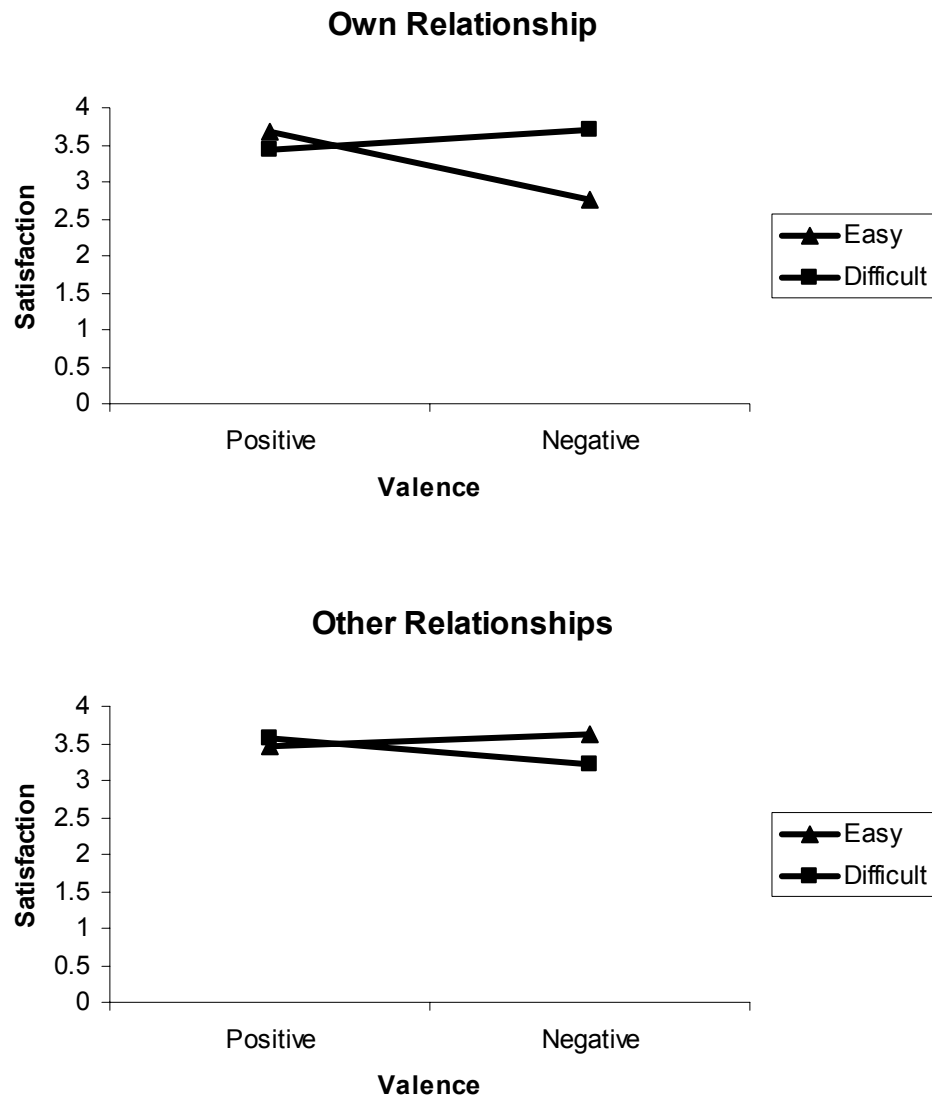




Figure 9

Study 3: Mean Dyadic Adjustment by Thought Condition, Target, and Valence and Goal of Thoughts-listing Task.

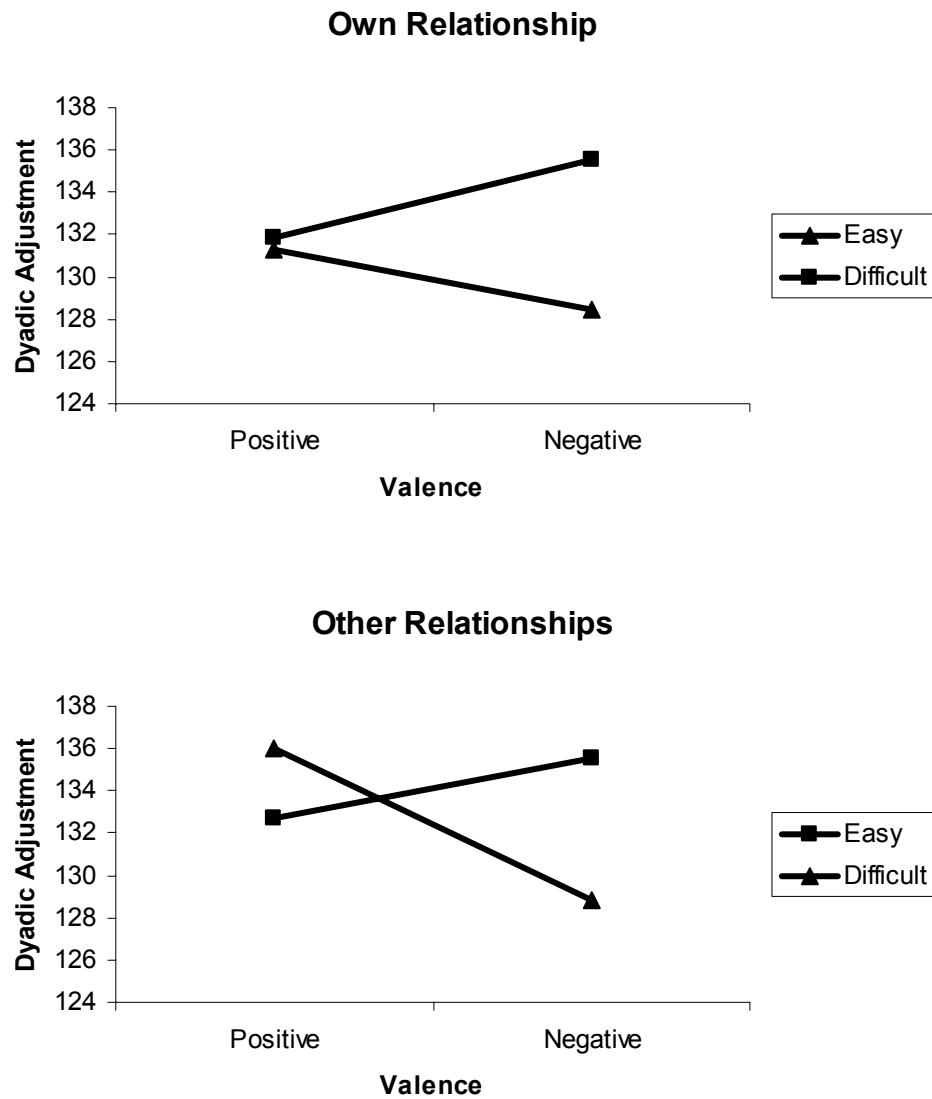
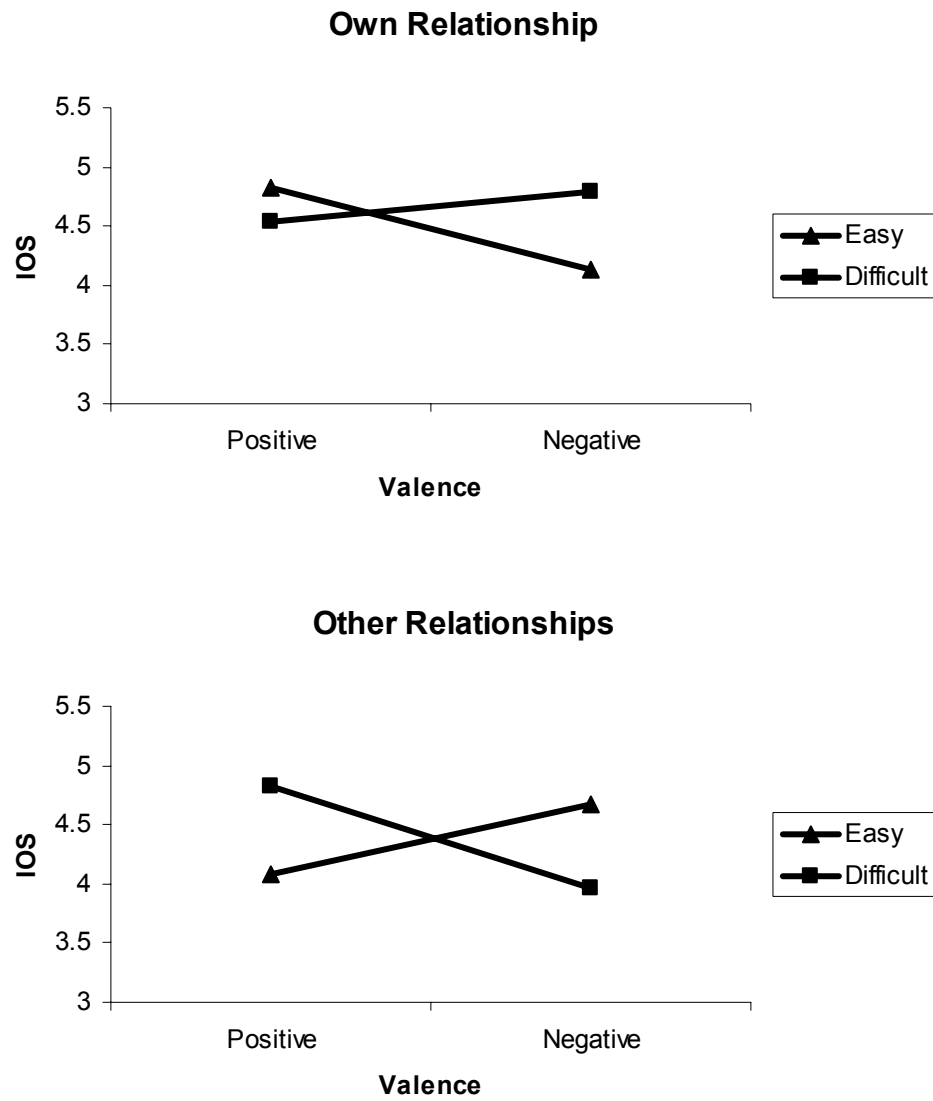


Figure 10

Study 3: Mean Inclusion-of-the-Other-in-the-Self by Thought Condition, Target, and Valence and Goal of Thoughts-listing Task.



Appendix A  
Demographic Information Questionnaire

## General Information

1) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2) Year in school (please check one):

\_\_\_\_\_ Freshman  
\_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore

\_\_\_\_\_ Junior  
\_\_\_\_\_ Senior

3) Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

4) Major: \_\_\_\_\_

5) Your race (please check one):

\_\_\_\_\_ African American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Asian American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian

\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify):  
\_\_\_\_\_

6) Status of your relationship (please check one):

\_\_\_\_\_ Friendship  
\_\_\_\_\_ Dating Casually  
\_\_\_\_\_ Dating Regularly

\_\_\_\_\_ Dating Steadily  
\_\_\_\_\_ Engaged or Married  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify):  
\_\_\_\_\_

7) For how long have you been in your current dating relationship (in months)?

\_\_\_\_\_

8) How exclusive is your relationship? (please check one)

\_\_\_\_\_ Neither I nor my partner date others  
\_\_\_\_\_ My partner dates others but I do not  
\_\_\_\_\_ I date others but my partner does not  
\_\_\_\_\_ Both my partner and I date others

**STOP here until experimenter says to continue!!**

## Appendix B

### Thoughts-listing Tasks – Study 1











## Appendix C

### Subjective Ease Scales – Studies 1 & 3

### Assessment of Thoughts-listing Task

Please answer the following questions.

1) To what degree did you find it easy to list thoughts about your relationship?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all easy										Very easy

2) To what degree did you find it difficult to list thoughts about your relationship?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all difficult										Very difficult

### Assessment of Thoughts-listing Task

Please answer the following questions.

1) To what degree did you find it easy to list thoughts about other people's relationships?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all easy										Very easy

2) To what degree did you find it difficult to list thoughts about other people's relationships?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all difficult										Very difficult

Appendix D  
Relationship Scales

### My Goals for the Future of Our Relationship

To what extent does each of the following statements describe your feelings regarding your relationship? Please use the following scale to record an answer for each statement listed below.

Response Scale:

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

### Response

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) I will do everything I can to make our relationship last for the rest of our lives.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) I feel completely attached to my partner and our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) I often talk to my partner about what things will be like when we are very old.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) I feel really awful when things are not going well in our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) I am completely committed to maintaining our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6) I frequently imagine life with my partner in the distant future.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7) When I make plans about future events in life, I carefully consider the impact of my decisions on our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8) I spend a lot of time thinking about the future of our relationship.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9) I feel really terrible when things are not going well for my partner.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10) I want our relationship to last forever.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11) There is no chance at all that I would ever become romantically involved with another person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12) I am oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship (for example, I imagine life with my partner decades from now).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13) My partner is more important to me than anyone else in life – more important than my parents, friends, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14) I intend to do everything humanly possible to make our relationship persist.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15) If our relationship were ever to end, I would feel that my life was destroyed.

## Satisfaction with My Relationship

1) Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements regarding your relationship (circle an answer for each item).

- |   |                       |                   |                     |                     |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| a) My partner fulfills my needs for intimacy (sharing personal thoughts, secrets, etc.).  | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| b) My partner fulfills my needs for companionship (doing things together, enjoying each other's company, etc.).                       | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| c) My partner fulfills my sexual needs (expressing affection, kissing, intercourse).  | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| d) My partner fulfills my needs for security (I trust my partner, feel comfortable in a stable relationship, etc.).                   | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| e) My partner fulfills my needs for emotional involvement (feeling emotionally attached, feeling good when another feels good, etc.). | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |

For the following item, please circle a number which best represents how much you agree.

2) I feel satisfied with our relationship.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

3) Our relationship is much better than others' relationships.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

4) Our relationship is close to ideal.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

5) Our relationship makes me very happy.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

6) Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs for intimacy, companionship, etc.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

## Attitudes About My Relationship

Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occa- sionally Disagree	Fre- quently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
1. Matters of recreation & leisure	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Religious matters	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Demonstrations of affection	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Friends	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Sex relations	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. Conventionality (proper behavior)	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. Philosophy of life	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. Ways of dealing with parents or family	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. Whether to marry	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. Aims, goals, things believed important	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. Amount of time spent together	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
12. Making major decisions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
13. Career or graduate school decisions	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	All the Time	Most of the Time	More Often Than Not	Occa- sionally	Rarely	Never
14. How often do you discuss or have you considered ending your relationship?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
15. How often do you or your partner leave the room after a fight (walk away from the issue/partner)?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
16. How often do you think things are going well between you and your partner?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
17. Do you confide in your partner?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
18. Do you ever regret that you became involved with your partner?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
19. How often do you quarrel?	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
20. How often do you "get on each other's nerves?"	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<i>How often do you and your partner. . .</i>		Less Than Once a Month	Once or Twice a Month	Once or Twice a Week	Twice a Day	More Often
21. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas	Never	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
22. Laugh together	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
23. Calmly discuss something	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
24. Work together on a project	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____



25. Do you kiss your partner?      Every Day      Almost Every Day      Occasionally      Rarely      Never  
 \_\_\_\_\_

26. Do you and your partner engage in outside interests together?      All of Them      Most of Them      Some of Them      Few of Them      None of Them  
 \_\_\_\_\_

There are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. **(circle yes or no)**

27.                      Yes                      No                      Being too tired for affection (physical or verbal)  
 28.                      Yes                      No                      Not showing love

The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point "happy" represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot that best describes the degree of happiness – all things considered – of your relationship.

29.                      0                      0                      0                      0                      0                      0                      0

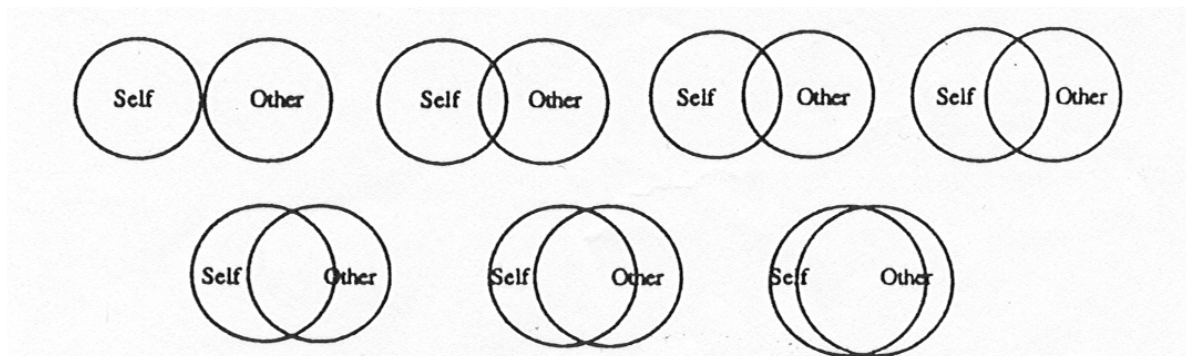
---

Extremely Unhappy      Fairly Unhappy      A Little Unhappy      Happy      Very Happy      Extremely Happy      Perfect

30. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship? Please check one statement only.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and would go to almost any length to see that it does.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do all I can to see that it does.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do my fair share to see that it does.
- \_\_\_\_\_ It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but I can't do much more than I am doing now to help it succeed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but I refuse to do any more than I am doing now to help it succeed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ My relationship can never succeed, and there is no more that I can do to keep the relationship going.

31. Please select the picture that best describe the relationship between you and your partner (circle one).



**Assessing Investments**

1) Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements regarding your relationship (circle an answer for each item).

- |  |                       |                   |                     |                     |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| a) I have invested a great deal of time in our relationship.                                   | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| b) I have told my partner many private things about<br>Myself (I disclose secrets to him/her). | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| c) My partner and I have an intellectual life together<br>that would be difficult to replace.  | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| d) My sense of personal identity (who I am) is linked to<br>my partner and our relationship.   | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| e) My partner and I share many memories.   | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |

For the following item, please circle a number which best represents how much you agree with the statement.

2) I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end.

- |                      |    |                      |    |    |    |                               |   |   |                   |   |   |                   |
|----------------------|----|----------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| -6                   | -5 | -4                   | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0                             | 1 | 2 | 3                 | 4 | 5 | 6                 |
| Strongly<br>disagree |    | Disagree<br>somewhat |    |    |    | Neither agree<br>nor disagree |   |   | Agree<br>somewhat |   |   | Strongly<br>agree |

3) Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner (recreational activities, etc.) and I would lose all this if we were to break up.

- |                      |    |                      |    |    |    |                               |   |   |                   |   |   |                   |
|----------------------|----|----------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| -6                   | -5 | -4                   | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0                             | 1 | 2 | 3                 | 4 | 5 | 6                 |
| Strongly<br>disagree |    | Disagree<br>somewhat |    |    |    | Neither agree<br>nor disagree |   |   | Agree<br>somewhat |   |   | Strongly<br>agree |

4) I feel very involved in our relationship – like I have put a great deal into it.

- |                      |    |                      |    |    |    |                               |   |   |                   |   |   |                   |
|----------------------|----|----------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| -6                   | -5 | -4                   | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0                             | 1 | 2 | 3                 | 4 | 5 | 6                 |
| Strongly<br>disagree |    | Disagree<br>somewhat |    |    |    | Neither agree<br>nor disagree |   |   | Agree<br>somewhat |   |   | Strongly<br>agree |

5) My relationships with friends and family members would be complicated if my partner and I were to break up (e.g., my partner is friends with people I care about).

- |                      |    |                      |    |    |    |                               |   |   |                   |   |   |                   |
|----------------------|----|----------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| -6                   | -5 | -4                   | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0                             | 1 | 2 | 3                 | 4 | 5 | 6                 |
| Strongly<br>disagree |    | Disagree<br>somewhat |    |    |    | Neither agree<br>nor disagree |   |   | Agree<br>somewhat |   |   | Strongly<br>agree |

6) Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal in my relationship with my partner.

- |                      |    |                      |    |    |    |                               |   |   |                   |   |   |                   |
|----------------------|----|----------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| -6                   | -5 | -4                   | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0                             | 1 | 2 | 3                 | 4 | 5 | 6                 |
| Strongly<br>disagree |    | Disagree<br>somewhat |    |    |    | Neither agree<br>nor disagree |   |   | Agree<br>somewhat |   |   | Strongly<br>agree |

### Assessing Alternatives

1) Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements regarding your relationship (circle an answer for each item).

- |   |                       |                   |                     |                     |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| a) My needs for intimacy (sharing personal thoughts, secrets, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships.  | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| b) My needs for companionship (doing things together, enjoying each other's company, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships.                       | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| c) My sexual needs (holding hands, kissing, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships.  | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| d) My needs for security (feeling trusting, comfortable in a stable relationship, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships.                          | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |
| e) My needs for emotional involvement (feeling emotionally attached, feeling good when another feels good, etc.) could be fulfilled in alternative relationships. | Don't Agree<br>At All | Agree<br>Slightly | Agree<br>Moderately | Agree<br>Completely |

For the following item, please circle a number which best represents how much you agree.

2) The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

3) My alternatives to our relationship are close to ideal (dating another person, spending time with friends or on my own, etc.).

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

4) If I weren't dating my partner, I would do fine – I would find another appealing person to date.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

5) My alternatives are attractive to me (dating another person, spending time with friends or on my own, etc.).

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

6) My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship.

-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly disagree		Disagree somewhat				Neither agree nor disagree			Agree somewhat			Strongly agree

## Appendix E

### Manipulation and Involvement Check Questionnaires

### **Instruction Check**

We now have a question regarding your instructions on the thoughts-listing task. In the past, we have had difficulties making our instructions clear and understandable. We ask this question to make sure that people understood our directions and remembered to follow them. Please answer the following questions (please check one).

For the thoughts-listing task, your instructions were to:

List thoughts regarding other people's romantic relationships

List thoughts regarding my romantic relationship

Regardless of whose relationship you were being asked to think about, you were instructed to list thoughts regarding ways in which the relationship is:

Positive (good, desirable)

Negative (bad, undesirable)

**STOP here until experimenter says to continue!!!**

## Involvement Check

We have one last question to ask you. Now and then, people (accidentally) sign up for our studies without realizing that in order to participate, it is necessary to currently be involved in an ongoing dating relationship. When this happens, people sometimes take part in the study in any event. Instead of describing a real, ongoing relationship, they describe a previous relationship, a friend's relationship, or an imaginary relationship. Of course, data of this sort are inaccurate and unreliable, and weaken our research project.

So that we may determine whether our data are accurate and reliable, we ask you to answer two final questions. Irrespective of how you answer these questions, you will receive full credit for participation. Also, the experimenter will not know how you, personally, answered these questions, given that your name will not be attached to your data (i.e., your data will be coded by number, not name). Please answer truthfully.

1) Are you, in fact, involved in an ongoing dating relationship (please check one)?

No  
 Yes

2) Did you accurately and honestly describe that relationship during today's research session (check one)?

My Answers Were Not At All Accurate  
 My Answers Were Somewhat Accurate  
 My Answers Were Completely Accurate

*When you have completed this questionnaire,  
place it face down on the desk in front of you.  
When everyone is done, we will proceed to the next activity.*

Appendix F  
Thoughts-Listing Task – Study 2











Appendix G  
Subjective Ease – Study 2

## Thought-Rating Scale

Now that you have listed thoughts about relationships, we would like you to rate the degree to which it was easy or difficult for you to list each thought. For each thought, please use the scale below to determine how easy or difficult it was for you to think of that thought. First, determine whether it was easy or difficult, and then determine *how* easy or difficult it was to think of it. Write that number in the left-hand margin of the thoughts-listing form. Please write just one number per thought. Be sure to include a negative sign for any difficult thoughts listed. Do not write on this sheet.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Very difficult		Somewhat difficult			Neither easy nor difficult			Somewhat easy		Very easy

Appendix H  
Thoughts-listing Tasks – Study 3

### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are **good** or **desirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, “My relationship is...,” or “My partner is...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are **bad** or **undesirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, “My relationship is...,” or “My partner is...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_



### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of other people's romantic relationships and their partners that are **good** or **desirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, "Other people's relationships are...", or "Their partners are...", and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **5** thoughts about features of other people's romantic relationships and their partners that are **bad** or **undesirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, "Other people's relationships are...", or "Their partners are...", and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

**Thoughts-listing Task**

On the lines below, please list **25** thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are **good** or **desirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, "My relationship is...", or "My partner is...", and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_
16. \_\_\_\_\_
17. \_\_\_\_\_
18. \_\_\_\_\_
19. \_\_\_\_\_
20. \_\_\_\_\_
21. \_\_\_\_\_
22. \_\_\_\_\_
23. \_\_\_\_\_
24. \_\_\_\_\_
25. \_\_\_\_\_

### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **25** thoughts about features of your romantic relationship and your partner that are **bad** or **undesirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of your relationship, your partner, yourself, or your interactions with your partner. Thoughts may start off with, "My relationship is...", or "My partner is...", and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_
16. \_\_\_\_\_
17. \_\_\_\_\_
18. \_\_\_\_\_
19. \_\_\_\_\_
20. \_\_\_\_\_
21. \_\_\_\_\_
22. \_\_\_\_\_
23. \_\_\_\_\_
24. \_\_\_\_\_
25. \_\_\_\_\_

**Thoughts-Listing Task**

On the lines below, please list **25** thoughts about features of other people’s romantic relationships and their partners that are **good** or **desirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, “Other people’s relationships are...,” or “Their partners are...,” and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

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### Thoughts-listing Task

On the lines below, please list **25** thoughts about features of other people's romantic relationships and their partners that are **bad or undesirable**. Feel free to list thoughts about any aspect of their relationships, their partners, or their interactions. Thoughts may start off with, "Other people's relationships are...", or "Their partners are...", and so on. Please list one thought per space, and list whatever thoughts come to mind.

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