

Comparing You = Comparing Me: Social Comparisons of the Expanded Self

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Abstract

We examine whether individuals respond to comparisons involving romantic partners as they would to comparisons involving the self. Four studies ($N = 2,210$) using recalled (Studies 1-3) and actual (Study 4) comparisons about attractiveness (Study 1) and relationship skills (Studies 2-4) demonstrated that individuals high in self-other overlap decrease domain relevance following upward but not downward comparisons to protect their positive partner perceptions. This strategy was absent among those low in self-other overlap. Study 2 demonstrated that this effect extends to best friends, but not casual friends, due to the degree of self-other overlap. Furthermore, when reminded of their partner's inferiority in a domain, high overlap participants maintained positive global partner perceptions, whereas low overlap participants' global perceptions were negatively affected (Study 3). These results suggest that individuals do experience partner-other comparisons as if they were directly involved, but only if their partner is incorporated into their self-identity.

Keywords

social comparisons, self-other overlap, romantic relationships, partner comparisons

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When you see a couple that gets along great, doesn't argue, and seems like best friends, don't you tend to think, "He's just a great husband. He must be so much easier to get along with than mine." I know I sure did . . . My thought was, "My brother in law must just be a much easier man to be married to than [my husband]."

—Alexander (2011)

A quick Internet search reveals numerous blogs in which individuals discuss the comparisons they make between their romantic partners and other people. Finding out that one's partner is superior or inferior to another person can result in altered partner evaluations. A woman who sees the latest Brad Pitt film may, for example, come to see her husband as less attractive, at least temporarily. A man who learns that his new girlfriend earns more than his last girlfriend may view the current flame as more professionally successful.

A vast literature has examined social comparisons, the comparisons that individuals make between themselves and other people (e.g., B. P. Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004). This research, however, has assumed that social comparisons involve the self directly. Indeed, in his original Social Comparison Theory, Festinger (1954) asserts that, in the absence of objective criteria, individuals will compare *themselves* to others as a means of evaluating themselves. Similarly, more recent definitions

describe social comparison as "the process of thinking about information about one or more people in relation to *the self*" (Wood, 1996, pp. 520-521, emphasis added), or as the "process in which individuals relate *their own* characteristics to those of others" (A. P. Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, p. 16, emphasis added). In the present research, we challenge the assumption that social comparisons always occur between the self and another person; we argue instead that social comparisons may involve the expanded self: Individuals may make social comparisons that involve close others, the others who they include in their expanded self-concept.

The idea that individuals compare people other than the self is not new. Indeed, past research suggests that individuals may compare one person with another to evaluate personality traits (e.g., Herr, 1986) or attractiveness (e.g., Kenrick & Gutierrez, 1980). These comparisons, however, would typically lack the self-protective component that characterizes social comparisons. When one is outperformed on a self-relevant dimension, one's self-perceptions are threatened; the other's success makes one's own abilities seem inferior (e.g., Collins, 1996; Muller & Fayant, 2010). Past research

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suggests that individuals are typically so averse to being outperformed that they will distance themselves from superior others (Pleban & Tesser, 1981) and downplay or avoid domains in which they expect to be outperformed (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). When individuals are themselves the outperformers, in contrast, they may emphasize the importance of the comparison dimension (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983) to enhance their positive self-perceptions.

Thus, a student who compares herself with another student with higher Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores may feel worse about herself, and consequently be motivated to protect her self-esteem by devaluing GRE scores. A supervisor who compares the GRE scores of two students, in contrast, will not experience this motivation to change the relevance of the comparison dimension. Comparing one person with another should not be associated with the same motivational consequences observed in past social comparison research. If, however, individuals compare someone who is part of their expanded self, such as their relationship partner, the consequences may be similar to those that occur when one compares the self directly.

According to Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion model, when individuals become involved in a romantic relationship, their identity begins to merge with their partner's to some degree. They start to take on their partner's perspective, characteristics, and resources. Consequently, they experience their partner's outcomes as if they were their own (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Indeed, when comparisons involve the partner and the self, individuals experience their partner's outcomes as their own regardless of their own self-evaluative consequences (e.g., Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008). Thus, individuals who view their partner's identity as highly overlapped with their own may respond to comparisons between their partner and another person as they would to a comparison involving the self—by protecting their partner as they would protect the self. For example, if one's spouse is outperformed professionally by a friend's spouse, one may downplay the importance of professional success, thus protecting one's positive regard for the partner.

Indeed, past research suggests that individuals are motivated to see their partner as superior to others (e.g., Gagné & Lydon, 2001; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In these studies, however, partners were compared with abstract references such as the average other or the ideal partner; like the "better-than average effect" (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), these abstract references are nebulous, and can be manipulated to suit individuals' motivational needs (Mussweiler, 2003). In contrast, comparisons with specific targets may result in less favorable perceptions of the partner. For example, after being exposed to a *Playboy* centerfold, husbands rated their wives as less sexually attractive (Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989). Thus, comparisons with unequivocally superior others do lead to more negative perceptions of the partner, as they do for the self. It

remains unclear whether individuals attempt to protect their partner perceptions following such comparisons as they would protect themselves. The present studies are the first to test this possibility directly.

Research regarding derogation of attractive alternatives (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989) provides indirect evidence that individuals may strategically protect their partner by disparaging superior others. It is unclear, however, whether individuals use this strategy to protect their partner or themselves. Indeed, Johnson and Rusbult (1989) argue that individuals derogate attractive alternatives to maintain their belief that they are loyal, committed partners. Furthermore, exposure to attractive alternatives elicits automatic self-protective responses from individuals in romantic relationships (Plant, Kunstman, & Maner, 2010), suggesting that derogating attractive alternatives has more to do with protecting the relationship and the self than the partner.

The literature on intergroup comparisons also provides indirect evidence that individuals are motivated to protect people who are part of their expanded self. For example, when individuals learn that their group is worse than another group on a trait, they tend to devalue the trait (e.g., Schmader & Major, 1999). A dyad, as the smallest form of a group, should be subject to similar effects. That is, individuals should be motivated to believe that their relationship is superior to other relationships. Indeed, highly committed individuals tend to see their relationship as better than most other relationships, especially when their relationship is threatened (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000).

In discussing comparisons involving the expanded self, however, we are examining a process that occurs at the individual rather than group level. Comparing a close other with another person is not the same as making an intergroup comparison of one dyad with another. For example, a father who compares his son's math abilities with those of another child is not making a comparison at the group level; he is not comparing his own family with the family of the other child. Rather, he is comparing his child with another child directly. Similarly, a woman who compares her partner to a friend's partner on attractiveness may find her own partner to be inferior. The woman may consider herself to be much more attractive than her friend, and consider her dyad on average to be more attractive than the friend's dyad. The comparisons of herself to the less attractive friend and of her dyad to the less attractive dyad thus pose no threat. The comparison between her partner and the friend's partner, however, is more problematic. Our key research question focuses on whether she will be motivated to engage protective strategies to defuse this potentially partner-threatening comparison, even though she herself is not directly involved. The present studies examined the social comparisons that individuals make between their romantic partner and another individual. We argue that individuals do indeed make social comparisons between their partner and other individuals, and that these comparisons can influence individuals' perceptions of

their partner. Furthermore, this research is the first to examine the possibility that just as individuals engage social comparison strategies aimed at maintaining positive self-evaluations, so too will they engage in social comparison strategies aimed at maintaining positive partner evaluations.

Overview of Current Studies

In Study 1, participants recalled comparisons between their romantic partner and another individual in the domain of physical attractiveness. In Study 2, we examined whether individuals would respond protectively to comparisons involving any individual connected to the self (e.g., acquaintances) or only those more closely connected to the self (e.g., romantic partners). In Study 3, we investigated the effect of such comparisons on individuals' perceptions of their partner relative to their ideal. In Study 4, we examined our hypotheses using actual rather than recalled comparisons. Across studies, we predicted that participants would rate their partner less positively after upward than downward comparisons. Furthermore, we predicted that individuals who included their partner in their own identity would attempt to protect the partner from the negative implications of an upward comparison: They would rate the comparison dimension as less important following an upward than downward comparison.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants recalled a time when they compared their partner to another person who was either more or less attractive. We predicted that participants would rate their partner as less attractive following an upward than downward comparison, but that those who included the partner in their identity would rate attractiveness as less important after upward than downward comparisons.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid US\$0.70 for completing the survey. Participants were eligible for the study if they were currently involved in a romantic relationship, and if they passed a standard attention check (as recommended by recent research regarding careless responding in Internet research; Maniaci & Rogge, 2014; Meade & Craig, 2012). We applied these selection criteria to all MTurk studies.

We faced additional challenges when conducting these studies online, including minimal control over the testing environment and the inability to monitor participants. Consequently, some participants may not have read the manipulation instructions carefully or may have misunderstood the instructions. Furthermore, some participants failed to recall a comparison at all. Thus, across all MTurk studies, we examined participants' open-ended and manipulation

check responses *before* hypothesis testing to ensure that we included only those participants who clearly demonstrated that they had made a comparison between their partner and another person, other than themselves, in the assigned direction in our analyses (see Table 1 for reasons for exclusion based on manipulation responses). Across our studies, between 21.6% and 34.8% of participants were excluded for not following manipulation instructions. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating that up to 38.8% of MTurk participants (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013), and 45% of online participants (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009) are inattentive and fail to follow instructions, and should be deleted from analyses because they increase noise and reduce statistical power. This exclusion rate is also consistent with published studies using similar samples (e.g., Emery, Muise, Dix, & Le, 2014).

In total, 1,797 U.S. residents who signed up to complete the survey were eligible. Of those, 626 participants completed the comparison manipulation incorrectly. In addition, 23 were outliers on one of our key variables (i.e., more than 3 *SDs* below the mean; our analyses remained significant when these outliers were included). Altogether, 1,148 participants were included in the analyses. Participants were 738 female, 403 male, 2 transgendered, and 5 gender-unidentified individuals ($M_{\text{age}} = 30.29$, $SD = 9.57$) currently in a romantic relationship ($M_{\text{relationship length}} = 71.34$ months, $SD = 79.60$).

Across all MTurk studies, included and excluded participants did not differ on age, relationship length, or self-other overlap (all $ps > .06$).¹ Gender did not moderate results for any of our hypotheses ($F_s < 2.56$, $ps > .07$) and is thus not discussed further.

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a larger study on thoughts and feelings about relationships. First, participants completed a 10-item measure of self-other overlap (e.g., "My identity and my partner's identity overlap a great deal"; Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004; $\alpha = .85$) using an 11-point scale ($-5 = \textit{strongly disagree}$; $+5 = \textit{strongly agree}$). We then randomly assigned participants to recall a time when they noticed that their partner was less attractive than (upward comparison condition), more attractive than (downward comparison condition) another person, or make no comparison at all (control condition). Participants in the upward and downward conditions described the comparison in open-ended form. Next, they indicated how attractive their partner was relative to the comparison target on a 7-point scale ($-3 = \textit{the other person was much more attractive}$; $+3 = \textit{my partner was much more attractive}$) with a midpoint of 0 (*they were both equally attractive*). They then rated the importance of attractiveness for success in life on a 7-point scale ($-3 = \textit{not at all important}$; $+3 = \textit{very important}$).

Finally, a subset of participants ($n = 898$) completed a two-item measure of partner attractiveness ("How attractive

Table 1. Reasons Participants Were Excluded for Due to Failed Manipulation.

Reason for exclusion	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Did not recall a comparison	239	54	29
Did not follow instructions			
Compared on dimension other than physical attractiveness (e.g., personality, ambition)	105	—	—
Wrote about sexual chemistry or physical attraction instead of physical attractiveness	17	—	—
Made comparison in opposite direction	5	1	—
Made a lateral comparison	3	—	—
Compared self instead of partner/friend	2	—	1
Compared own relationship to another relationship	2	2	8
Compare self with partner/friend	—	11	2
Wrote nonsense response	2	—	—
Made both an upward and a downward comparison	2	—	1
Compared wrong target (compared partner instead of friend and vice versa)	—	1	—
Unclear whether comparison was actually made (e.g., did not mention comparison target, provided insufficient details regarding traits/actions of partner and comparison target being compared, not clear that comparing physical attractiveness, no evaluative statement made)	43	84	21
Made a comparison that was not directly comparable			
Bisexual participants compared male partners with female comparison targets and vice versa	5	—	—
Comparison involving friends not analogous with partner comparisons (e.g., compared same friend in two different friendships or two different friends)	—	58	—
Compared two potential mates	—	—	1
Failed manipulation check			
Indicated comparison was in opposite direction	91	27	8
Indicated comparison was lateral	106	26	6
Did not compare the right target (compared close friend in casual friend condition and vice versa)	—	35	—
Skipped manipulation check	4	3	—
Total	626	302	77

is your partner?" and "How good-looking is your partner?" $r = .93, p < .001$) using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very*). To confirm that participants were indeed making comparisons that influenced partner perceptions, we asked control participants to rate the attractiveness of their partner on these two items as part of a larger questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Comparison manipulation. In general, participants provided rich accounts of the comparisons that they had made between their partner and such targets as friends, acquaintances, and coworkers. As one participant asked to recall an upward comparison wrote,

I recently met one of N's friends that came to visit. He was extremely attractive . . . He has a very toned body that is obvious with his shirt on whereas N is a little on the chunky side . . . [H]e [also] has a clear complexion and perfect teeth. N's teeth are nice but he doesn't have a clear complexion and at times it's overwhelming.

Another participant described in detail her partner's superior attractiveness,

My partner is very good looking, and my friend's husband is not as attractive. The last time they came over, I could not help but think about how much better looking my partner is than her husband . . . Her husband is overweight and has a bad complexion and teeth. My partner is in great shape physically, has beautiful teeth and an amazing smile, and always looks amazing.

Analytic strategy. For most statistical analyses (unless otherwise noted), we conducted moderated multiple regressions with self-other overlap entered as a mean-centered continuous variable, comparison condition entered as either one effects-coded variable (upward = 1, downward = -1, for manipulation check and domain importance ratings) or two effects-coded variables (upward = 1, downward = 0, baseline = -1 and upward = 0, downward = 1, baseline = -1, for attractiveness or partner/friend perception ratings), and the comparison condition by self-other overlap interaction term(s). We conducted simple effects analyses for interactions by examining the differences between comparison conditions at 1 *SD* above and below the mean of self-other overlap (Aiken & West, 1991). In line with a recent recommendation (Cumming, 2014), we report 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals with 5,000 resamples for the unstandardized regression coefficients and the

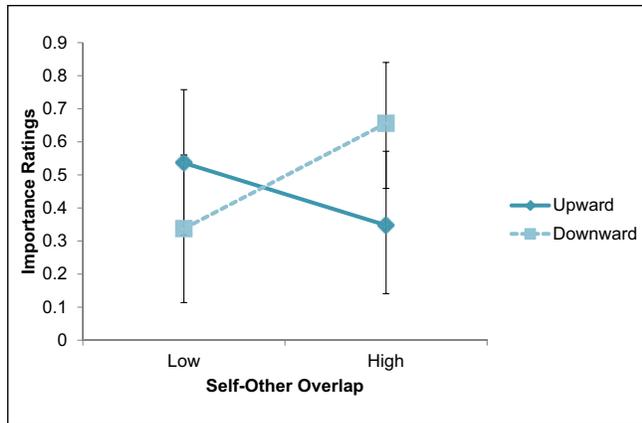


Figure 1. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between self-other overlap and attractiveness importance ratings among participants in the upward and downward comparison conditions (Study 1).

Note. Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

standardized effect size estimates (*r*) in square brackets with *p* values.

Manipulation check. As expected, participants reported that their partner was less attractive in the upward than downward condition, $b = -2.10 [-2.15, -2.05], SE = 0.03, t(758) = -83.52, p < .001$. Furthermore, higher overlap predicted higher relative attractiveness ratings, $b = 0.08 [0.05, 0.11], SE = 0.02, t(758) = 5.04, p < .001$. There was no interaction, $b = -0.01 [-0.04, 0.02], SE = 0.02, t(758) = -0.42, p = .67$.

Attractiveness importance ratings. There were no main effects, but as predicted, self-other overlap moderated the effect of comparison condition on importance ratings, $b = -0.08 [-0.15, -0.01], SE = 0.03, t(753) = -2.47, p = .01, r = -.09 [-.17, -.01]$. Among low overlap participants, comparison conditions did not differ in attractiveness importance ratings, $b = 0.10 [-0.05, 0.25], SE = 0.07, t(753) = 1.37, p = .17, r = .05 [-.12, .02]$. High overlap participants, however, rated attractiveness to be less important in the upward than downward condition, $b = -0.15 [-0.30, -0.10], SE = 0.07, t(753) = -2.13, p = .03, r = -.08 [-.15, -.07]$ (see Figure 1).

Attractiveness ratings. As predicted, comparison condition did affect attractiveness ratings, $F(2, 892) = 33.27, p < .001, R^2 = .06$: Participants in the upward condition rated their partner as less attractive than did those who made no comparison, $b = 0.38 [0.22, 0.54], SE = 0.08, t(892) = 4.96, p < .001, r = .16 [.10, .23]$, and those who made a downward comparison, $b = 0.62 [0.48, 0.77], SE = 0.08, t(892) = 8.10, p < .001, r = .26 [.20, .32]$. Participants who made a downward comparison rated their partner as more attractive than did those who made no comparison, $b = -0.24 [-0.39, -0.11], SE = 0.08, t(892) = -3.19, p = .001, r = -.11 [-.17, -.04]$. Higher overlap also predicted higher attractiveness ratings, $b = 0.19$

$[0.15, 0.23], SE = 0.02, t(892) = 9.72, p < .001$. There was no interaction, $F(2, 892) = 0.73, p = .48, R^2 = .001$.

Overall, Study 1 provides support for our hypothesis that only those individuals who included the partner in their own identity would engage strategies aimed at minimizing the threat of upward comparisons and maximizing the benefits of downward comparisons. Furthermore, these comparisons did affect how individuals viewed their partner: Both high and low overlap individuals viewed their partner as less attractive when compared with a more attractive other and more attractive when compared with a less attractive other. Only high overlap participants, however, responded to the threat of the upward comparison by devaluing attractiveness.

Study 2

Study 1 provides evidence that individuals who view their romantic partner as part of the self use strategies to maintain positive evaluations of the partner following comparisons between their partner and specific other individuals. We argue that this motivation should be present only when individuals include in their self-concept the other whom they are comparing. Indeed, past research has indicated that individuals will enhance their romantic partners but not their friends (Morry, Reich, & Kito, 2010). Thus, in Study 2, we examined whether individuals would use protective strategies only after comparing their romantic partners, or whether they would also use these strategies after comparing other close individuals, such as best friends. Specifically, we tested a mediated moderation model in which different kinds of relationships would be associated with different degrees of self-other overlap, which in turn would predict the degree to which individuals would engage strategies to protect the other following comparisons with another person. To test this model, we manipulated self-other overlap by assigning participants to compare different targets (e.g., partner, friend, or acquaintance) and measured self-other overlap, our proposed mediator. We hypothesized that individuals would be motivated to protect their partner or best friend following a potentially threatening comparison, but should not be motivated to protect an acquaintance or casual friend in the same way. Because the casual friend is not typically part of one’s self-identity, one should have no need to protect or enhance one’s evaluations of this friend. We also used Study 2 to replicate our findings for comparisons in the domain of relationship skills.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited through MTurk and paid US\$0.70. In total, 997 U.S. residents were eligible for this study. Of those, 695 followed manipulation instructions and were included in the analyses. Participants were 490 female, 202 male, and 3 gender-unidentified individuals ($M_{age} = 33.91$ years, $SD = 9.99$ years) who were married ($M_{marriage\ length} = 95.59$ months, $SD = 98.95$ months).

Table 2. Comparison Domains for Each Relationship Type and Comparison Condition (Studies 2 and 3).

Comparison domain	Study 2			Study 3
	Casual friend	Best friend	Partner	
Thoughtful/romantic gestures				
Upward	9	10	6	30
Downward	15	9	13	33
Communication skills				
Upward	9	9	6	6
Downward	3	2	3	7
Being supportive				
Upward	15	17	17	—
Downward	29	33	24	—
Being attentive to your needs				
Upward	4	7	7	12
Downward	6	8	9	10
Being helpful				
Upward	5	2	5	9
Downward	11	9	8	5
Gift giving				
Upward	4	8	21	17
Downward	10	12	13	12
Conflict resolution				
Upward	3	2	4	3
Downward	1	2	8	2
General responsiveness				
Upward	4	1	1	—
Downward	4	6	3	—
Being affectionate				
Upward	—	—	—	7
Downward	—	—	—	3
Other				
Upward	2	4	6	9
Downward	1	—	2	8

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three relationship conditions: partner, best friend, or casual friend. They were asked to think about their partner, best friend (who could not be their romantic partner), or casual friend—a friend other than their best friend or another close friend—while completing an 8-item measure of self-other overlap similar to the one used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .89$). Participants then completed the same comparison manipulation and manipulation check as in Study 1 except this time they were asked to compare their partner/friend with someone else's partner/friend in a relationship-relevant domain and to indicate the comparison domain (see Table 2 for list of domains). Using the same scale as in Study 1, participants also rated the importance of the specific domain in which they made the comparison for relationship success.

Participants in all conditions also rated their partner or friend on 13 relationship-relevant traits (e.g., understanding, kind and affectionate, responsive); this served as our measure of partner/friend perception (Murray et al., 1996; $\alpha = .91$). Ratings were made using a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*

characteristic; 9 = *completely characteristic*). Control participants completed this measure for their partner/friend without first making a comparison; this enabled us to confirm that both upward and downward comparisons were influencing participants' perceptions of their partner/friend.

Results and Discussion

Comparison manipulation. We first examined open-ended responses to confirm that participants were comparing their partner/friend with another individual, rather than their relationship/friendship to another relationship/friendship. Participants whose responses did not meet our criteria were excluded from analyses (see Table 1).

As in Study 1, most participants had no difficulty recalling comparisons. For example, one participant in the best friend condition wrote,

My recent birthday K didn't even call. My wife's best friend had a very thoughtful gift she gave to her on her birthday. I don't

Table 3. Mediated Moderation Model Estimates for Comparison by Relationship-Type Interaction for Domain Importance Ratings (Study 2).

	Original model (DV = importance ratings)		Mediator model (DV = self-other overlap)		Mediated moderation model (DV = importance ratings)	
	b	t	b	t	b	t
Intercept	1.70	27.86***	0.23	3.18**	1.70	28.33***
Comparison	-0.35	-5.75***	-0.05	-0.72	-0.36	-5.96***
Relationship Type 1 ^{a,b,c}	0.15	1.76 [†]	1.58	15.72***	0.005	0.04
Relationship Type 2	0.13	1.45	0.76	7.34***	0.07	0.77
Self-other overlap					0.09	2.23*
Comparison × Relationship Type 1 ^{d,e,f}	-0.18	-2.19*	-0.01	-0.11	0.02	0.21
Comparison × Relationship Type 2	0.006	0.07	0.09	0.92	0.10	1.06
Comparison × Self-other					-0.13	-3.21**

Note. Comparison condition was effects-coded where upward = 1 and downward = -1; Relationship Type 1 was effects-coded where casual friend = -1, best friend = 0, and partner = 1; and Relationship Type 2 was coded where casual friend = -1, best friend = 1, and partner = 0. DV = dependent variable.

^aF(2, 426) = 4.90, p = .01, R² = .02.

^bF(2, 426) = 263.15, p < .001, R² = .55.

^cF(2, 424) = 0.31, p = .73, R² = .001.

^dF(2, 426) = 2.98, p = .05, R² = .01.

^eF(2, 426) = 0.49, p = .61, R² = .001.

^fF(2, 424) = 0.63, p = .54, R² = .003.

[†]p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

expect gifts but it would have been nice if he had at least called. (Upward Comparison)

Another participant in the casual friend condition wrote,

C is always considerate of my time and commitments. She recently offered to switch plans to another day because she could hear in my voice that I was stressed, and she wanted to make our plans convenient for me. By contrast, my husband's friend J is never considerate of my husband's time or commitments. J stops by the house over and over, though he's been told many times to call first. (Downward Comparison)

Manipulation check. A 2 (direction: upward, downward) × 3 (relationship: casual friend, best friend, partner) ANOVA indicated that participants reported that their partner/friend did worse in the upward condition (M = -2.05, SE = 0.05) than did participants in the downward condition (M = 2.69, SE = 0.05), b = -2.37 [-2.44, -2.29], SE = 0.04, t(426) = -66.71, p < .001. There was also a main effect of relationship condition, F(2, 426) = 11.70, p < .001. Participants rated their casual friends (M = 0.10, SE = 0.06) as performing worse than their best friends (M = 0.53, SE = 0.06), b = 0.43 [0.23, 0.63], SE = 0.09, t(426) = 4.84, p < .001, and their partners (M = 0.33, SE = 0.06), b = 0.23 [0.07, 0.39], SE = 0.09, t(426) = 2.66, p = .008. Unexpectedly, participants also rated their partners as worse than their best friends, b = 0.20 [0.02, 0.39], SE = 0.09, t(426) = 2.34, p = .02. Importantly, however, there was no relationship condition by comparison condition interaction, F(2, 426) = 1.49, p = .12, R² = .01.

Domain importance ratings. Two chi-square tests indicated that the comparison domain recalled was contingent upon

comparison condition, $\chi^2(8) = 28.94, p < .001$, but not target condition, $\chi^2(16) = 22.44, p = .13$ (see Table 2 for domains).

We argue that relationship condition should moderate the impact of comparison condition on domain importance ratings because the relationship conditions differ in their degree of self-other overlap. To examine this possibility, we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005; see Table 3). Importance rating was predicted by the comparison by relationship interaction, F(2, 426) = 2.98, p = .05, R² = .01. Consistent with our hypothesis, there was no difference between the comparison conditions in the casual friend condition, b = -0.17 [-0.40, 0.06], SE = 0.11, t(426) = -1.57, p = .12, r = -.08 [-.02, .17]. There was, however, a difference between the comparison conditions in the best friend, b = -0.34 [-0.53, -0.16], SE = 0.11, t(426) = -3.23, p = .001, r = -.15 [-.24, -.06], and partner conditions, b = -0.53 [-0.75, -0.33], SE = 0.10, t(426) = -5.32, p < .001, r = -.25 [-.33, -.16]. That is, participants rated the domain to be less important following an upward than downward comparison when they were comparing a close other (best friend or romantic partner), but not when they were comparing a less close other (casual friend; Figure 2). Relationship condition, moreover, did predict self-other overlap, F(2, 426) = 263.15, p < .001, R² = .55: Participants reported lower self-other overlap for casual friends (M = -2.11, SE = 0.13) than for best friends (M = 0.99, SE = 0.13), b = 3.10 [2.74, 3.42], SE = 0.18, t(426) = 16.97, p < .001, r = .63 [.56, .69], and partners (M = 1.48, SE = 0.12), b = 3.92 [3.55, 4.25], SE = 0.18, t(426) = 22.07, p < .001, r = .73 [.67, .76]. They also reported less overlap for best friends than partners, b = 0.82 [0.46, 1.14], SE = 0.17, t(426) = 4.69, p < .001, r = .22 [.12, .31]. Finally, relationship type did not moderate comparison

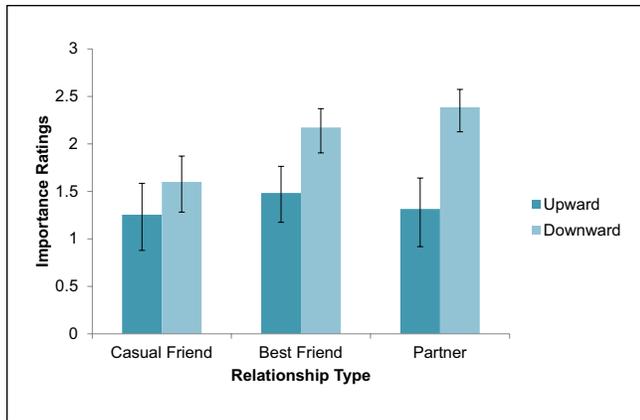


Figure 2. Impact of upward and downward comparisons on comparison domain importance ratings of married participants asked to compare their casual friend, best friend, and partner (Study 2).
Note. Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

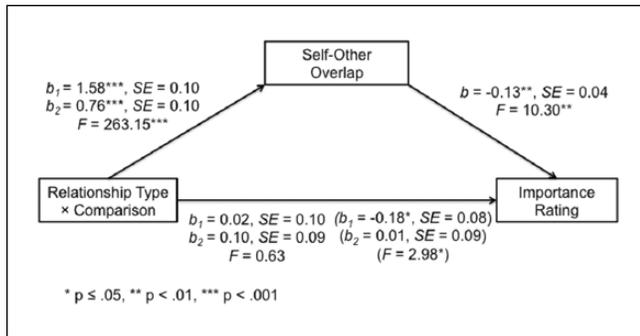


Figure 3. The mediated moderation model that was tested in Study 2.

Note. Self-other overlap explains the interaction between relationship condition and comparison condition on importance ratings. Because relationship type was coded as two effects-coded contrast, b_1 represents the regression coefficients associated with the first relationship-type effects-coded variable as well as product terms involving the first relationship-type effects-coded variable, and b_2 represents the regression coefficient associated with the second relationship-type effects-coded as well as product terms involving the second relationship-type effects-coded variable. The F value tests whether the overall effect of relationship type or the overall relationship type by comparison condition interaction was significant.

condition in the third model, $F(2, 424) = 0.63, p = .54, R^2 = .003$, but self-other overlap did, $b = -0.13 [-0.22, -0.04], SE = 0.04, t(424) = -3.21, p = .001, r = -.15 [-.24, -.06]$ (see Figure 3).

In sum, these results support our hypothesis that individuals are more likely to respond in a protective manner, reporting the domain to be less important following an upward than downward comparison, if comparisons involve individuals who are included in their identity to a greater degree. Furthermore, this effect is limited to comparisons involving individuals with whom one is in a truly close relationship: best friends and romantic partners.

Comparison target perceptions. To examine the effect of comparison direction on partner/friend perceptions, we performed a 3 (direction: upward, downward, no comparison) \times 3 (relationship: partner, best friend, casual friend) ANOVA. As predicted, there was a main effect of comparison condition, $F(2, 686) = 12.48, p < .001, R^2 = .03$. Participants in the upward condition ($M = 6.03, SE = 0.10$) viewed their partner/friend more negatively than did participants in the control ($M = 6.44, SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.40 [0.15, 0.67], SE = 0.14, t(686) = 2.99, p = .003, r = .11 [.04, .19]$, and downward conditions ($M = 6.72, SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.68 [0.42, 0.94], SE = 0.14, t(686) = 4.99, p < .001, r = .19 [.11, .26]$. Participants also viewed their partner/friend more positively in the downward than control condition, $b = 0.28 [0.03, 0.53], SE = 0.13, t(686) = 2.25, p = .03, r = .09 [.01, .16]$. Thus, across all relationships, individuals evaluated their partners/friends less positively following upward comparisons and more positively following downward comparisons.

There was also a main effect of relationship condition, $F(2, 686) = 19.15, p < .001, R^2 = .05$. Participants rated casual friends ($M = 5.97, SE = 0.10$) less favorably than best friends ($M = 6.80, SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.83 [0.18, 0.72], SE = 0.13, t(686) = 6.18, p < .001, r = .23 [.16, .29]$, and partners ($M = 6.42, SE = 0.09$), $b = 0.45 [0.59, 1.08], SE = 0.13, t(686) = 3.42, p = .001, r = .13 [.05, .21]$. They also rated partners less favorably than best friends, $b = -0.38 [-0.63, -0.14], SE = 0.13, t(686) = -2.92, p = .004, r = -.11 [-.18, -.04]$.

There was no relationship condition by comparison condition interaction, $F(4, 686) = 0.29, p = .89, R^2 = .002$.

Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, self-other overlap did not moderate the impact of the comparison on partner perceptions. If high overlap participants engaged protective strategies following upward comparisons, however, one might also expect that high overlap participants would maintain more positive partner evaluations than would lower overlap participants. We argue that this protective effect may occur at a more global level than in the specific comparison domain. Whereas participants may be constrained in their ability to protect their partner evaluations in a specific domain when unequivocal evidence indicates that the partner is inferior, they may nevertheless continue to view their partner as close to their ideal, particularly if they view the partner's identity as highly overlapped with their own. We examined this possibility in Study 3.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited through MTurk and paid US\$0.60. In total, 356 of the recruited participants were eligible for this study. Of those, 77 did not complete the manipulation task correctly. One participant who was more than 3.44 SDs below the mean on self-other overlap was excluded from analyses; our results remained significant

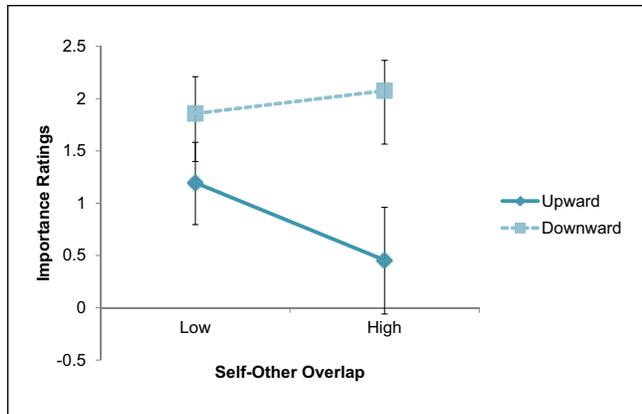


Figure 4. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between self-other overlap and comparison domain importance ratings among participants in the upward and downward comparison conditions (Study 3). Note. Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

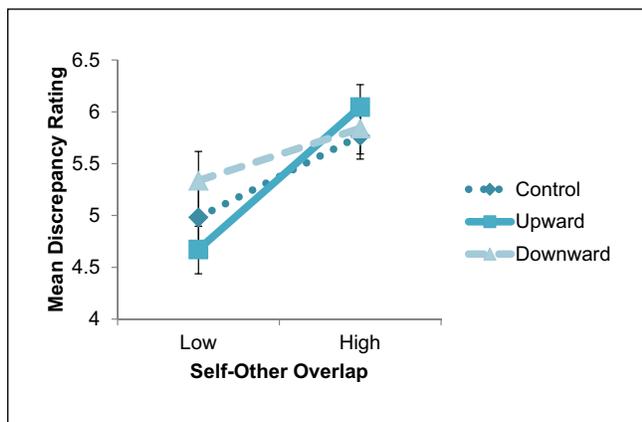


Figure 5. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between self-other overlap and discrepancy ratings among participants in the upward, downward, and no comparison control conditions. Note. Higher scores indicate greater match between participant’s current partner and ideal partner (Study 3). Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

when we included this outlier. Altogether, 278 participants were retained in our analyses. Participants were 186 female, 90 male, 1 transgendered male, and 1 gender-unidentified individuals ($M_{age} = 30.44$ years, $SD = 10.02$ years) currently involved in a romantic relationship ($M_{relationship\ length} = 70.35$ months, $SD = 83.57$ months).

Procedure. Participants first completed the same measure of self-partner overlap used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .87$). Participants then completed the same comparison manipulation about relationship-relevant domains, manipulation check, and importance rating used in Study 2. Participants in all conditions then completed a measure of current-ideal partner discrepancy by

comparing their partner with their ideal partner on 18 attributes (e.g., understanding, adventurous, good job; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; $\alpha = .91$) using a 7-point scale (1 = *my current partner does not match my ideal at all*; 7 = *my current partner completely matches my ideal*). Control participants completed the current-ideal discrepancy measure without first making a comparison; this enabled us to assess whether both the upward and downward comparisons were influencing participants’ global perceptions of their partner.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. As expected, participants reported that their partner performed worse in the upward ($M = -2.17$, $SE = 0.07$), and better in the downward condition ($M = 2.68$, $SE = 0.08$), $b = -2.42$ [$-2.53, -2.32$], $SE = 0.06$, $t(170) = -43.91$, $p < .001$.

Domain importance ratings. A chi-square test indicated that the comparison domain recalled was not contingent upon comparison condition, $\chi^2(7) = 3.31$, $p = .86$ (see Table 2 for domains).

Self-other overlap did not predict importance ratings, $b = -0.08$ [$-0.21, 0.05$], $SE = 0.07$, $t(170) = -1.18$, $p = .24$, but comparison condition did, $b = -0.57$ [$-0.78, -0.36$], $SE = 0.11$, $t(170) = -5.16$, $p < .001$, $r = -.37$ [$-.49, -.23$]. The effect of comparison condition, however, was qualified by the predicted interaction, $b = -0.15$ [$-0.28, -0.01$], $SE = 0.07$, $t(170) = -2.17$, $p = .03$, $r = -.16$ [$-.30, -.02$]. Both low, $b = -0.33$ [$-0.61, -0.04$], $SE = 0.16$, $t(170) = -2.11$, $p = .04$, $r = -.16$ [$-.29, -.02$], and high, $b = -0.81$ [$-1.12, -0.49$], $SE = 0.16$, $t(170) = -5.20$, $p < .001$, $r = -.37$ [$-.50, -.21$], overlap participants rated the domain to be less important after upward than downward comparisons; consistent with our prediction, this effect was larger among higher overlap participants (see Figure 4).

Current-ideal partner discrepancy ratings. Results indicated no main effect of comparison condition, $F(2, 272) = 1.85$, $p = .16$, $R^2 = .01$, but a main effect of self-other overlap, $b = 0.27$ [$0.20, 0.32$], $SE = 0.03$, $t(272) = 8.43$, $p < .001$, $r = .45$ [$.36, .55$], which was qualified by the predicted comparison by self-other overlap interaction, $F(2, 272) = 5.39$, $p = .005$, $R^2 = .04$ (Figure 5). At low levels of self-other overlap, participants rated their partner as less like their ideal following an upward comparison relative to no comparison, $b = 0.31$ [$-0.05, 0.68$], $SE = 0.17$, $t(272) = 1.79$, $p = .07$, $r = .11$ [$-.02, .23$], and a downward comparison $b = 0.66$ [$0.28, 1.03$], $SE = 0.19$, $t(272) = 3.53$, $p = .001$, $r = .21$ [$.09, .32$]. In contrast, participants rated their partner as more like their ideal following a downward comparison relative to no comparison, $b = -0.35$ [$-0.76, 0.07$], $SE = 0.18$, $t(272) = -1.93$, $p = .06$, $r = -.12$ [$-.25, .02$]. Comparison conditions did not differ at high levels of self-other overlap.

In sum, low overlap participants viewed their partner as more discrepant from their ideal partner after recalling a time when their partner was inferior to someone else. Conversely, they viewed their partner as less discrepant from their ideal partner after recalling a time when their partner was superior to someone else. In contrast, those high in overlap appear to have protected their evaluations of their partner following an upward comparison: They continued to view the partner as close to their ideal.

Study 4

Studies 1 to 3 provide consistent evidence that individuals will engage in protective strategies following social comparisons of their expanded self. These studies, however, relied on recalled comparisons. High overlap individuals may selectively recall comparisons that portray their partner in the best light possible: They may recall upward comparisons in domains that are peripheral to relationship success, or in which the reference was only slightly better. Conversely, they may recall downward comparisons in which their partner was significantly better. Accordingly, in Study 4, we examined comparisons that were set up in the lab rather than recalled by participants themselves.

Method

Participants. Ninety-three introductory psychology students participated in exchange for course credit. Four participants were excluded: 1 did not complete the pretest questionnaire, 1 experienced technical problems during the lab session, 1 reported a high level of suspicion and was also 3.50 *SDs* below the mean on self-other overlap (results remained significant when we included this outlier), and 1 was dating more than one person. Seventy-five female and 14 male ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.75$ years, $SD = 3.82$ years) individuals currently in a romantic relationship ($M_{\text{relationship length}} = 24.16$ months, $SD = 19.91$ months) were included in our analyses.

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a larger study on impression formation and romantic relationships. Before the lab session, participants completed an online questionnaire, which included the self-other overlap measure ($\alpha = .81$). Their partners also completed an online questionnaire in which they rated themselves on 24 relationship-related traits (e.g., avoids conflict, is spontaneous). At the lab session, participants were told that the researchers were interested in how people form impressions based on minimal information and whether people form different impressions depending on whether they know the target or not. Thus, they would receive information—which in reality was bogus—about their partner, based on their partner's questionnaire, and a past participant.

Participants were randomly assigned to either the relative feedback or absolute feedback condition. In the relative

feedback condition, participants received the scores of both their partner and the past participant on two ambiguously desirable traits (spontaneity and high motivation to avoid conflict; see supplementary materials for sample partner feedback). For instance, high motivation to avoid conflict can be construed positively as agreeableness or negatively as avoidance. Similarly, spontaneity can be viewed positively as *joie de vivre* or negatively as impulsiveness. We used ambiguous traits so that participants would be able to interpret the feedback favorably for their partner. In the relative feedback condition, participants received information that their partner scored higher on one trait (i.e., a score of 66; higher score trait) but lower on the other (i.e., a score of 57; lower score trait) in comparison with the past participant. For example, a participant might learn that his or her partner scored higher on high motivation to avoid conflict (i.e., 66 vs. 34) but lower on spontaneity (i.e., 57 vs. 83) than the past participant. Thus, the participant would make both a downward comparison for high motivation to avoid conflict and an upward comparison for spontaneity. All participants also received demographic information about the past participant.

To control for the effect of the absolute scores, we included an absolute feedback condition in which participants received the same scores (i.e., 66 and 57) for their partner as they did in the relative feedback condition; however, they received only demographic information about the past participant. Across conditions, we also varied the trait on which their partner scored higher: Some participants were told that their partner scored higher on spontaneity (spontaneity condition), whereas others were told that their partner scored higher on high motivation to avoid conflict (conflict condition).

Participants then rated how important these traits were for relationship success using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all important for relationship success*; 7 = *very important for relationship success*).²

Results and Discussion

Trait importance ratings. A 2 (feedback: relative condition vs. absolute condition; between-subjects) \times 2 (higher domain: conflict vs. spontaneity; between-subjects) \times 2 (partner score: higher score trait vs. lower score trait; within-subject) mixed ANOVA was conducted.

Between-subject effects. We did not expect any between-subject effects because our key factor, partner score, was nested within subjects. Unexpectedly, the feedback conditions differed from each other, $b = -0.18 [-0.35, -0.02]$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(85) = -2.06$, $p = .04$. Participants in the absolute condition ($M = 5.03$, $SE = 0.12$) reported higher mean importance ratings than did participants in the relative condition ($M = 4.67$, $SE = 0.12$). It is possible that participants in the relative condition devalued the trait on which their partner scored lower to a greater extent than did participants in

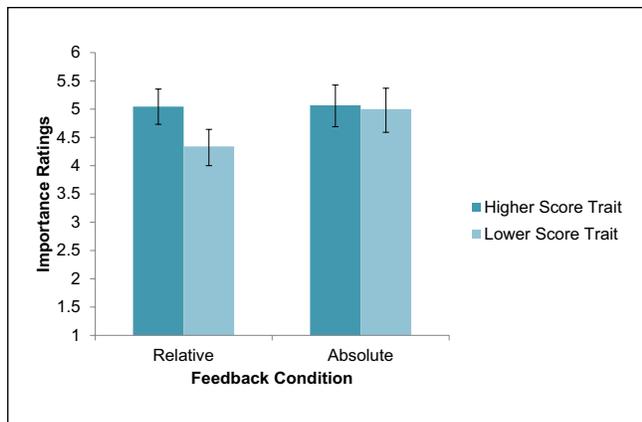


Figure 6. Partner score by feedback condition interaction (Study 4).

Note. Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

the absolute condition to protect their partner, resulting in a lower average score. Indeed, participants rated the lower score trait as less important in the relative ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.06$) than absolute condition ($M = 5.00, SD = 1.33$), $b = 0.66$ [0.15, 1.16], $SE = 0.26, t(87) = 2.58, p = .01$. In contrast, participants did not rate the trait on which their partner scored higher differently in the relative ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.08$) and absolute conditions ($M = 5.07, SD = 1.23$), $b = 0.02$ [-0.46, 0.48], $SE = 0.25, t(87) = 0.09, p = .93$.

Within-subject effects. There was a main effect of partner score, $b = -0.40$ [-0.76, -0.07], $SE = 0.18, t(85) = -2.28, p = .02, r = -.24$ [-.41, -.03], which was qualified by the predicted partner score by feedback interaction, $b = -0.32$ [-.67, .02], $SE = 0.18, t(85) = -1.83, p = .07, r = -.19$ [-.38, .02] (Figure 6). When participants received relative feedback, they rated the higher score trait as more important ($M = 5.04, SE = 0.17$) than the lower score trait ($M = 4.31, SE = 0.18$), $b = -0.72$ [-1.13, -0.32], $SE = 0.25, t(85) = -2.89, p = .005, r = .30$ [-.45, -.12]. This difference was absent in the absolute condition ($M_{\text{lower score trait}} = 4.99, SE = 0.18; M_{\text{higher score trait}} = 5.07, SE = 0.17$), $b = -0.08$ [-0.65, 0.47], $SE = 0.25, t(85) = -0.32, p = .75, r = -.03$ [-.26, .20]. Partner score did not interact with higher domain condition, $b = -0.17$ [-0.51, 0.16], $SE = 0.18, t(85) = -0.94, p = .35$. Unexpectedly, partner score also interacted with feedback condition and higher domain condition, $b = 0.39$ [0.05, 0.75], $SE = 0.18, t(85) = 2.22, p = .03, r = .23$ [.02, .42].

To examine the three-way interaction while maintaining Type I error rate (Cohen, 2007), we conducted two partner score by higher domain mixed ANOVAs for each feedback condition. We expected a main effect of partner score in the relative condition because participants would be motivated to protect their partner following an upward comparison by rating the lower score trait as less important than the higher score trait. In contrast, we did not expect there to be a main

effect of partner score in the absolute condition because, in the absence of a social comparison, participants would not be motivated to protect their partner. We did not expect any higher domain effects or interactions.

Relative condition. As predicted, participants rated the trait on which their partner scored lower as less important ($M = 4.31, SE = 0.15$) than the trait on which their partner scored higher ($M = 5.04, SE = 0.16$) regardless of which trait they were evaluating, $b = -0.72$ [-1.16, -0.32], $SE = 0.22, t(42) = -3.37, p = .002, r = -.46$ [-.64, -.19]. This finding is consistent with the results of Studies 1 to 3, in which participants reported that the comparison domain was less important when their partner did worse than the comparison target.

Absolute condition. When no comparison information was provided, there was no difference between importance ratings for the two traits, $b = -0.08$ [-0.62, 0.46], $SE = 0.28, t(43) = -0.28, p = .78$; thus, it does not appear that individuals rated the trait on which the partner scored lower as less important simply because this score was lower in absolute terms, suggesting that individuals feel no need to protect their partner in the absence of social comparison information. Unexpectedly, partner score interacted with higher domain, $b = -0.56$ [-1.10, -0.03], $SE = 0.28, t(43) = -2.01, p = .05$: Participants rated motivation to avoid conflict as more important ($M_{\text{conflict rating, spontaneity higher condition}} = 5.26, SE = 0.28; M_{\text{conflict rating, conflict higher condition}} = 5.36, SE = 0.26$) than spontaneity ($M_{\text{spontaneity rating, spontaneity higher condition}} = 4.78, SE = 0.25; M_{\text{spontaneity rating, conflict higher condition}} = 4.73, SE = 0.28$), regardless of the domain in which the partner received the higher score. In the absence of any comparison, participants appeared to view motivation to avoid conflict as somewhat more important than spontaneity. These differences, however, were not reliable, $t_s < 1.60, p_s > .11$.

Self-other overlap analysis. The results for the importance ratings revealed that participants in the relative feedback condition reported that the trait on which their partner did worse was less important than the trait on which their partner did better; this effect was absent in the absolute feedback condition, in which the better and worse scores differed in absolute terms but were not associated with a social comparison. We next tested whether self-other overlap would predict the difference in trait importance ratings in the relative feedback condition as in Studies 1 to 3.

We first calculated a contrast score (i.e., difference in trait importance ratings) for each participant (Judd, McClelland, & Ryan, 2009). Positive difference scores mean participants rated the lower score trait as more important, whereas negative difference scores mean that participants rated the higher score trait as more important. We then regressed this contrast score on higher domain condition, self-other overlap, and their interaction. We focused this analysis on the relative

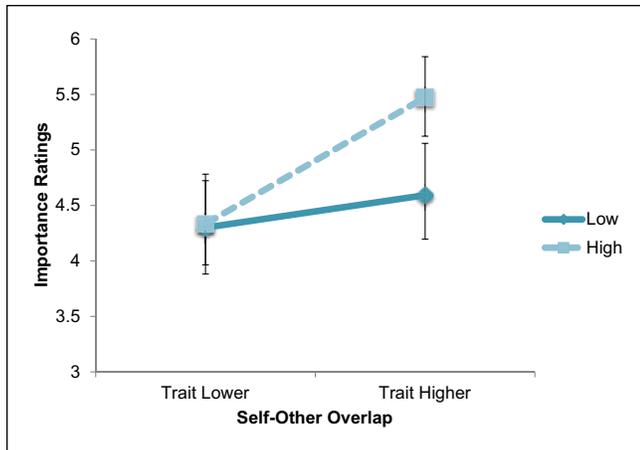


Figure 7. Simple regression lines depicting the relationship between self-other overlap and trait importance ratings among participants in the relative feedback condition (Study 4). Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval.

rather than absolute feedback condition because self-other overlap would only be expected to have an impact for conditions involving partner-other comparisons.

As predicted, there was a main effect of self-other overlap, $b = -0.28$ $[-0.47, -0.05]$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(40) = -1.99$, $p = .05$, $r = -.29$ $[-.54, -.04]$; this is equivalent to an interaction between self-other overlap and the within-subject factor, partner score. Low overlap participants did not rate the traits differently, $b_{\text{intercept}} = -0.29$ $[-0.81, 0.15]$, $SE = 0.29$, $t(40) = -1.00$, $p = .32$, $r = -.15$, $[-.38, .08]$. High overlap participants, however, rated the trait on which their partner scored lower as less important than the trait on which their partner scored higher, $b_{\text{intercept}} = -1.14$ $[-1.64, -0.51]$, $SE = 0.30$, $t(40) = -3.82$, $p < .001$, $r = -.51$ $[-.73, -.20]$ (Figure 7). Consistent with the previous analysis, there was a main effect of partner score, $b_{\text{intercept}} = -0.72$ $[-1.11, -0.29]$, $SE = 0.21$, $t(40) = -3.49$, $p = .001$, $r = -.47$ $[-.67, -.15]$: Participants rated the lower score trait as less important than the higher score trait.

Though Study 4 had a smaller sample than Studies 1 to 3, it has several advantages that increased effect size and its statistical power. First, we used a more powerful experimental manipulation; providing in-lab feedback based on their partner's supposed responses created similar comparison experiences across participants. We also minimized careless responding, which reduces power (Maniaci & Rogge, 2014), by having participants complete measures in the lab. Furthermore, by using a within-subject design, we accounted for greater within-person variance. Finally, our sample of undergraduate dating students is more homogeneous than the online samples used in Studies 1 to 3.

Overall, Study 4 provides further support that participants do indeed make social comparisons between their partner and another individual. Consistent with Studies 1 to 3, they responded to these comparisons involving their partner in a

protective manner: Regardless of the trait being rated, they reported lower importance ratings following upward than downward comparisons, especially if they included their partner in their identity. In contrast, in the absence of social comparison information, participants showed no evidence of strategically protecting partner perceptions.

Reliability of Primary Findings

To determine the reliability of the comparison by overlap interaction on importance ratings across studies, we calculated an incredibility index, IC index = 0.41 (the probability we would obtain more non-significant effects than reported given the expected number of non-significant results; Schimmack, 2012; Table 4). A high IC index (i.e., 0.90; Ioannidis & Trikalinos, 2007) indicates publication bias in a set of studies due to chance, the “file-drawer problem,” questionable research practices, an underestimation of the true effect size, or a combination of these factors (Francis, 2012); thus, a high IC index indicates that the effect may be unreliable and consequently difficult to replicate. Our low IC index suggests that this set of studies is unbiased and that the comparison by overlap interaction effect on importance ratings is reliable and thus replicable.

We also conducted a cross-study meta-analysis of the comparison by overlap interaction on importance ratings to determine whether as a group these studies lend support to our hypotheses. We used a fixed-effects model to make a conditional inference about only the studies included in our analysis rather than a population of studies (Hedges & Vevea, 1998). Overall, the comparison by overlap interaction had a small association with domain importance ratings, $r = -.12$ $[-.18, -.07]$, $p < .001$. The effect size estimates are displayed graphically as a forest plot (Figure 8).

General Discussion

Since Festinger published his original theory of social comparison processes in 1954, researchers have taken for granted that these comparisons involve the self directly: Individuals compare themselves with another person, for a variety of reasons (self-evaluation, self-enhancement, self-improvement; Wood, 1989) with a variety of consequences for affect (e.g., B. P. Buunk et al., 1990), self-perceptions (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), and motivation (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). The present studies provide the first evidence that social comparisons may also involve individuals other than the self. Indeed, individuals may make comparisons of their expanded selves, comparing romantic partners and even close friends to other individuals, with consequences similar to those observed for comparisons involving the self more directly.

That individuals compare people other than the self is hardly surprising. One may notice that one friend is more helpful than another, or that one instructor is more effective

Table 4. Sample Sizes, Effect Sizes, Power, Total Power, and Incredibility Index for Comparison by Self-Other Overlap Interaction.

Study	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	Sig	Power
1	757	-.09	.014	1	.694
2	432	-.15	.001	1	.893
3	174	-.16	.031	1	.573
4	44	-.29	.053	0	.488
Average	351.75	-.17		.75	.663
Total power	—	—	—	—	.175
Incredibility index	—	—	—	—	.413

Note. Sig = $p < .05$; Power = calculated using on each study's effect size.

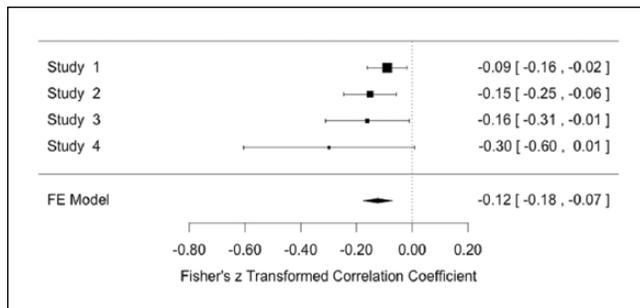


Figure 8. Forest plot of the comparison by overlap interaction on domain importance ratings.

than another. What is significant in the present research is the motivational consequences of these comparisons. If one notices that one's instructor is less competent than a friend's instructor, one may simply come to view one's own instructor less positively. If one observes that one's romantic partner is less competent than a friend's partner, in contrast, one may go to considerable lengths to protect the partner from the potentially damaging consequences of this comparison. Indeed, we argue that the key predictions of Tesser's (1988) influential self-evaluation maintenance model should apply to comparisons involving close others. The present studies provide the first evidence that self-other overlap will determine the extent to which protective strategies will be engaged.

In the present studies, we focused on examining how the motivated processes examined in past social comparison research would apply when the comparison involved an individual included in the expanded self. We note that more general motivated reasoning processes may at times apply when comparisons occur involving individuals not included the expanded self. For example, a piano teacher who compares her pupil with a pupil taught by another teacher might be highly motivated to view her own student as more musically proficient. If, however, her student were more attractive or less mathematically inclined than the other student, we would not expect the teacher to alter her perceptions regarding the importance of attractiveness or math ability to life success. If, in contrast, the pupil described in this example

happened to be the teacher's own child, and thus a part of her expanded self, we would indeed predict that she would engage just such motivated strategies: She would be motivated to view attractiveness as more important and math as less important, in order to protect her child. Thus, although individuals may engage in motivated reasoning when making a host of comparisons between people, places, and things, the specific strategies outlined in the self-evaluation maintenance model should apply only when individuals are comparing others included in their self-concept.

We also considered the possibility that individuals engaged in more protective strategies following unfavorable comparisons of close others because they like close others more than acquaintances. Indeed, past research indicates that there is a moderate correlation between love/liking and inclusion of other in self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron & Fraley, 1999). This explanation, however, is not incompatible with our assertions regarding the importance of self-other overlap: Aron and Aron (1986) argue that liking and love represent a *desire* to include the other in the self, which may motivate individuals to *actually* include the close other in the self. Consequently, individuals will also include the close other's perspective in the self, leading them to experience these comparisons as if they themselves were directly involved. Thus, we would argue that self-other overlap would likely function as the mechanism through which liking leads to more protective responses following unfavorable comparisons.

Indeed, past research indicates that individuals make more situational attributions (i.e., favorable attributions) for liked others and more dispositional attributions (i.e., unfavorable attributions) for disliked others (e.g., Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). This is also true of close and non-close others (Aron et al., 1991). However, Sande et al. also found that individuals make more situational attributions for liked well-known others (e.g., friends) than liked acquaintances even after controlling for liking. This suggests that closeness (i.e., self-other overlap) mediates the effect of liking on the number of situational attributions because liked well-known others are included in the self to a greater degree than liked acquaintances, as we demonstrated in Study 2.

Although high overlap individuals' pattern of responses to partner-other comparisons is consistent with those expected for self-other comparisons (cf. Tesser & Paulhus, 1983), the present studies do not directly compare responses with comparisons involving the self and those involving the partner within a single study. Thus, we cannot assess whether partner-other comparison responses are of the same magnitude as self-other comparison responses. Because the self is not directly involved, individuals may feel less threatened by unfavorable partner-other comparisons, and their response to these comparisons may therefore be attenuated. In future research, it will be important to compare the magnitude of responses to these two forms of comparison more directly.

In the present research, we focused on romantic relationships (Studies 1-4) and friendships (Study 2). We would argue that comparisons involving any individuals whom one includes in the self-concept will have the potential to activate these motivational strategies. In particular, it seems likely that individuals will protect family members, especially children, following comparisons with other individuals. If one discovers that one's child has been outperformed in a soccer game by another child, for example, one may downplay the importance of athletic abilities to alleviate the potential threat of the comparison.

In addition, we focused primarily on positive comparison domains in these studies. Individuals may also compare their partners and best friends on negative comparison domains, such as jealousy, which may elicit different comparison responses (e.g., Morry, Kito, & Ortiz, 2011). Thus, future research should examine whether individuals still engage similar protective strategies when making an unfavorable partner-other comparison in a negative comparison domain.

Furthermore, individuals may employ an array of strategies to protect evaluations of close others in the face of threatening comparisons (Tesser, 1988). Although the present studies focused on the strategy of reducing importance of the comparison domain, individuals might also choose to distance themselves from individuals whom they view to be superior to their close other, and instead surround themselves with individuals similar to or even inferior to the close other (Pleban & Tesser, 1981). To the extent that the comparison is likely to occur on an ongoing basis, as when one compares one's partner to the partner of a close friend or family member, then individuals may seek to close the gap between the performance of the partner and that of the superior other (Pinkus et al., 2008). For example, a wife might encourage her husband to be more supportive, if she is reminded of a friend's husband who offered support. Finally, individuals may reframe comparisons, construing the partner's accomplishments to be similar to, or "in the same league as" those of a superior other (Collins, 1996). Thus, future research should examine the degree to which each of these strategies may play a role in protecting perceptions of close others following threatening social comparisons.

Finally, other relationship quality variables may also influence how individuals react to partner-other comparisons. For example, individuals in satisfying relationships are likely to be motivated to maintain positive partner perceptions and may be most adept at dealing with negative partner information. Indeed, past research has shown that satisfied individuals enhance their partners at the global level to maintain their relationship while having accurate assessments of their partner's strengths and weaknesses at the specific level to ensure that the relationship runs smoothly (Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005). Consequently, following partner-other comparisons, satisfied individuals may be motivated to engage in strategies to protect their positive global partner perceptions (Study 3), but are still willing to acknowledge their partner's weaknesses and strengths (Studies 1 and 2).

Past research suggests that individuals compare themselves to others on a daily basis (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992), with significant consequences for their affect and self-esteem. The present studies indicate that individuals also compare their partner with others. Finding that one's partner is superior or inferior to the partner of one's friend can have a significant impact on how one sees that partner, and potentially on whether one views that partner as an ideal match. Individuals who find themselves making many upward comparisons involving the partner may try to downplay these comparisons, but over time may become less satisfied with their relationship. In contrast, individuals who seek out or are faced with repeated downward comparisons involving the partner may conclude that they have made an excellent choice, which in turn may buffer the relationship from other stresses. In future research, it will be crucial to examine how comparisons involving the partner affect the longevity of and satisfaction with the relationships themselves.

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Notes

1. Across all studies, all results, except one, remained significant when we included participants who failed the attention check.
2. We did not examine partner perceptions because participants in the relative feedback condition made both an upward comparison and a downward comparison, making it difficult to disentangle the effect of each comparison.

Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at <http://pspb.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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