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Perceived Superiority and Markers Of Relationship Success:
My Dating Relationship Is More Likely to Succeed Than Yours

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Abstract

Participants ($N = 52$) completed an evaluation task in which they rated the extent to which 14 relationship attributes were characteristic of the average dating relationship and their own dating relationships. Instructions for the evaluation task alleged that each of the 14 attributes was predictive of the healthy development of romantic relationships. Evidence of perceived superiority was observed in participants' ratings for 13 of the 14 attributes. Consistent with previous research, in each case participants rated the putative marker of success more characteristic of their own than of the average dating relationship. Additional analyses showed that participants' ratings of the extent to which the markers of success were typical of their own dating relationships reliably differentiated between participants who were moderate versus high in relationship satisfaction, whereas ratings for the average dating relationship did not.

Markers of Relational Success:

My Relationship Is More Likely to Succeed Than Yours

A small but growing number of studies indicate that individuals tend to view their romantic relationships through the same kind of complimentary lenses that they view themselves. That is, in much the same way that individuals perceive themselves in exaggeratedly positive ways (Taylor & Brown, 1988), they tend to perceive their own intimates and relationships in markedly more flattering terms than they perceive others' partners or relationships (e.g., Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b).

The present paper extends this research by investigating perceived superiority in individuals' judgments concerning the extent to which attributes alleged to differentiate between successful and unsuccessful relationships are more characteristic of their own than of other's relationships. The data we present demonstrate that people's tendencies to hold rather indulgent views of their relationships generalize beyond idealistic images of a partner's personality (e.g., Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997, 1999) and relationship-enhancing thoughts about the features characteristic of their own and others' relationships (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; Van Lange, Rusbult, Semin-Goossens, Goerts, & Stalpers, 1999). In particular, we show that perceived superiority can manifest in inflated judgments concerning the degree to which individuals' own relationships possess attributes indicative of relationship success.

We also depart from typical practice in examining perceived superiority at the level of the individual belief rather than at some more macro level. To date, researchers have focused their analyses on global measures of perceived superiority that collapse across multiple ratings of a partner (e.g., in Murray's research) or lists of relationship features (e.g., in Rusbult and Van

Lange's research). In contrast, published research has yet to treat as worthy of investigation the specific *content* of beliefs for which perceived superiority has been observed. The analyses we present in this paper examine perceived superiority primarily at the level of the individual relationship attribute. Because the attributes represent putative markers of relational success, our attribute-level analyses allow us to examine research questions concerning (a) the extent to which individuals' ratings of the different attributes reflect perceived superiority and (b) whether ratings of the different attributes discriminate between groups of individuals on the basis of their self-reported relationship satisfaction.

Markers of Relational Success and the Functions of Perceived Superiority

Scholars who study perceived superiority presume that positive illusions, generally, and perceived superiority, more specifically, function to enhance the maintenance of relationships (Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; Van Lange et al., 1999) and to enable intimates to resolve the conflict between hope and fear that emerges in the face of growing interdependence and increasing awareness of a partner's imperfections (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997, 1999). Consistent with such claims, longitudinal investigations have shown that idealistic views of partners and relationships predict relationship stability (Murray et al., 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997, 1999; Rusbult et al., 2000) and both concurrent (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997) and later relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Rusbult et al., 2000). The evidence to date thus corroborates the notion that perceived superiority confers important advantages on those whose thinking about their relationships reveals tendencies toward idealism and excessively positive regard.

In our view, a potentially important but as yet unexamined implication of this research is that people ought to exhibit perceived superiority in their beliefs about the relative position of their relationships along dimensions predictive of relationship success. Stated differently, if perceived superiority operates in the service of relationship maintenance and needs to dispel fear and doubt about a relationship's promise for the future, people should be strongly motivated to perceive their relationships as superior to others in terms of the extent to which they possess those attributes presumed to foster healthy relationship growth and development. Of course, intimates might consider their own relationships superior to others on a wide variety of dimensions. Consistent with this proposition, Rusbult and Van Lange have observed perceived superiority in people's beliefs concerning constructive and destructive ways of responding to occasional relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; Van Lange et al., 1999) and positive and negative features of relationships (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). To our way of thinking, however, perceptions that one's relationship is uniquely advantaged in its position on dimensions specifically related to healthy growth and development ought to be ideally suited to the construction of conviction concerning the relationship's rosy future prospects because such perceptions target precisely those aspects of relationships thought to predict which relationships succeed and which do not.

Inspired by this logic, the present study investigates perceived superiority in individuals' beliefs concerning the extent to which their own relationships, more than those of others, are characterized by a set of putative "markers of relational success." Specifically, we assessed perceived superiority with an evaluation task that required participants to make judgments about their own and the average dating relationship and the degree to which each of several attributes with purported links to relationship success is characteristic of these two target relationships.

Most of the methods employed in past research to measure perceived superiority fall into one of two general categories. Several studies (most notably by Murray and colleagues) have operationalized perceived superiority through the use of trait rating tasks that focus participants on appraisals of a partner's personality (e.g., Hall & Taylor, 1976; Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997, 1999). Investigators typically compare participants' ratings of their own partners to their ratings of the typical partner along the same trait dimensions to obtain data concerning participants' tendency to view their partners in idealized ways. Other researchers have assessed perceived superiority with open-ended thought-listing tasks that ask participants to generate features of partners or relationships and to identify whether such features are more characteristic of their own or of others' partners or relationships (e.g., Rusbult et al., 2000; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995; Van Lange et al., 1999). Often participants are also asked to rate each feature they generate along some relevant evaluative dimension (e.g., constructiveness vs. destructiveness). Common measures of perceived superiority in this case assess the difference between the number of positive features describing participants' own relationships and the number of positive features describing others' relationships. Investigators have not yet, however, examined perceived superiority as reflected in differences at the level of individual beliefs about relationships. Even in Rusbult and Van Lange's thought-listing studies, for instance, the analyses focused on the number of positive or negative relationship thoughts generated (or on participants' ratings of these thoughts) rather than on differences observed at the level of the individual thoughts themselves. In choosing to examine perceived superiority at the level of the individual belief, then, our approach to assessing perceived superiority is novel even as it builds on existing research.

As part of a larger study examining optimism and responses to perceived risk, participants completed a battery of measures about their current romantic relationships. The present paper discusses participants' responses to two versions of a 14-item scale designed to assess individuals' tendency to believe that their own relationships, more than those of others, possess attributes predictive of relationship success.

For our measure of perceived superiority, we chose a judgment task in which the attribute list and accompanying instructions clearly linked each attribute with beneficial relational outcomes. Specifically, the instructions alleged that previous research had identified the attributes as markers of healthy relationship development. In actuality, the relationship characteristics in this scale reflect stereotyped views concerning the characteristics that "make" a good relationship (e.g., partners "know what the other's really thinking most of the time," "are happy with each other 'just the way they are'" and "feel completely satisfied with their relationship"), common-sense notions of the qualities required for healthy relationship-functioning (e.g., partners "keep their promises to each other," "share with each other"), and a number of relationship characteristics whose links with relationship success have been documented in previous research (e.g., partners "are truly responsive to each other's needs," "are confident depending on one another"). For the first version of the scale, participants judged the extent to which they believed each of the attributes is characteristic of the average dating relationship; for the second, they judged the extent to which these same attributes are characteristic of their own dating relationship.

We had two goals in conducting the analyses presented in this paper. First, and most generally, we wanted to replicate previous findings demonstrating perceived superiority. Not only would doing so further illustrate the generality of this well-established cognitive

phenomenon but, more importantly, it would support the validity of our contention that perceived superiority should be evident in the content of people's beliefs about their relationships. That is, if idealistic and excessively positive views of a relationship are constructions that serve needs to maintain a relationship and defend against feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, then people should be highly motivated to hold particular *types* of beliefs about their relationships, namely, beliefs suggesting that their own relationships are superior to others in terms of those attributes that foreshadow eventual or continued relationship success. Evidence that participants in the present study more strongly endorsed the alleged markers of success in appraisals of their own relationships than in appraisals of the average dating relationship would provide initial support for this hypothesis.

Second, we wanted to explore whether people's ratings in the evaluation task would reflect their own satisfaction with their current relationships. As we indicated earlier, previous research has shown that perceived superiority predicts concurrent relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997, 1999). However, given that investigators have not yet examined perceived superiority at the level of individual beliefs about relationships, we do not know whether some types of beliefs for which perceived superiority is observed are more closely connected to relationship satisfaction than others, nor whether beliefs about one's own relationship and beliefs about the average relationship are equally able to distinguish among those who are happy and those who are less happy in their relationships. We examined each of these possibilities in the present research. In other words, we used participants' ratings of the extent to which the various markers of success were characteristic of their own and the average dating relationship to test the very assumption embedded in the assessment task we used to gauge perceived superiority: the notion that some attributes of a relationship (or, as

operationalized in this task, some attributes of the partners within the relationship) are predictive of the healthy growth and development of a relationship. To the extent that we find differences in our analysis here—whether they emerge as variation in the extent to which the various attributes distinguish among highly-satisfied and less-satisfied individuals or as differences in the degree to which responses to the average and own relationship scales distinguish among these groups—such differences would suggest the need for further research investigating the possibility that not all perceived superiority is equal in its implications for relationship outcomes.

Method

Participants

Eighty undergraduate psychology students at university in Western Canada participated in this study for partial course credit. For purposes of the analyses presented in this paper, we selected only those participants who were currently involved in dating relationships. This led to the exclusion of 22 individuals who were not romantically involved at the time of the study and a further six individuals who indicated that they were currently married. The final sample thus consisted of 52 individuals (41 females, 10 males, and one participant who did not respond to the item about sex) who ranged in age from 18 to 39 years ($M = 22.35$, $SD = 3.98$). The majority identified themselves as Caucasian (60%) or Asian (30%) in descent. All were currently involved in dating relationships ranging in length from one to 120 months ($M = 26.88$, $SD = 24.27$). With the exception of three individuals, participants were involved with opposite-sex partners. Ten percent were casually dating, 63% were exclusively dating, 10% were engaged, and 19% were cohabiting.

Measures

Relationship success profile (RSP). We gauged the extent to which participants viewed their own current dating relationships as superior to other people's dating relationships with the Relationships Success Profile (Boon, 1992). The RSP consists of two 14-item scales, one in which the participant rates the extent to which the "average dating relationship" possesses 14 desirable characteristics, and a second in which they rate the extent to which their own current dating relationship possesses the same 14 characteristics. In an effort to ensure that responses to the items assessing perceptions of the average dating relationship were not influenced by responses to the own relationship scale (i.e., we wanted participants to use the average dating relationship as the anchor for their ratings of their own relationships), all participants completed the average relationship scale before they completed the scale assessing their perceptions of their own relationships. Instructions for the average relationship scale were as follows: "Research shows that the presence of certain characteristics can foster the growth of a healthy romantic relationship. Using the scale below, please rate the extent to which you think each characteristic is typical of the average dating relationship." With the exception that the phrase "average dating relationship" was replaced with the phrase "your dating relationship," the instructions for the own relationship scale were identical.

Participants rated each of the 14 relationship characteristics on a 7-point scale from 1 "not at all typical" to 7 "very typical." The characteristics included desirable relationship qualities such as "handle conflict constructively," "are happy with each other 'just the way they(we) are,'" "feel completely satisfied with their(our) relationship," "have compatible interests," and "are truly responsive to each other's needs" (differences in wording for the own

relationships scale are reflected by the pronouns in parentheses in each example). The complete roster of items can be seen in Table 1.

Relationship satisfaction. Participants completed three items designed to assess their satisfaction with their current dating relationships. Using a 7-point scale with endpoints 1 “not at all” to 7 “extremely,” participants indicated how satisfied they were with their relationship, how successful their relationship was, and how happy they were with their partner. The three items were averaged to form a relationship satisfaction index with higher numbers indicating greater satisfaction ($\alpha = .94$).

Demographic information. Participants reported their age, sex, and ethnic background. They also indicated the sex of their current romantic partner, the length of their current relationship (in months), and whether they and their current partner were casually or exclusively dating, engaged, cohabiting, or married.

Procedure

Participants completed the materials described above during the first session of a larger, two-session study that examined whether optimism moderates the effects of risk on the evaluation of relational transgressions (XXXX, 2001). After participants arrived at the laboratory, the research assistant informed them that the goal of the study was “to examine how personality characteristics influence the manner in which individuals view themselves and others” and that they would complete a variety of questionnaire measures in the first session. The questionnaire package contained items requesting basic demographic information as well as a variety of scales that assessed characteristics of participants’ personality (e.g., self-esteem, self-deception, optimism) and aspects of their romantic relationships (e.g., relationship optimism). The Relationship Success Profile and the measure of relationship satisfaction described above

were included among these scales. Once participants completed the battery of scales, the research assistant thoroughly debriefed them and answered any questions they may have had.

Participants returned to the lab approximately four days later for Session 2 of the study. As the present paper focuses exclusively on participants’ responses to a subset of the Session 1 measures (the RSP and relationship satisfaction measures), we will not discuss Session 2 further.

Results

The goals of the present analyses were twofold. First, we wanted to determine whether tendencies toward perceived superiority observed in other research would generalize to judgments concerning the degree to which participants’ relationships possess attributes indicative of relationship success. That is, we hoped to provide evidence that people believe that their own relationships, more than those of others, are characterized by the sorts of attributes that foster healthy relationship growth and development. In addition, we also wanted to examine whether ratings of the different “markers of success” would discriminate between groups of individuals on the basis of their self-reported relationship satisfaction. Do judgments reflecting perceived superiority distinguish between participants who are very happy with their relationships and those who are less happy?

Evidence for Perceived Superiority: My Relationship is More Likely to Succeed Than Yours

The two inner-left columns of Table 1 present means and standard deviations for the individual items of the RSP, separately for the average and own relationship scales. The far-right column presents F -values obtained in a series of one-way within-subjects ANOVAs (with target relationship as the within-subjects factor) testing the differences between means. The last row of Table 1 presents the same statistics calculated for the full scales.

In general, the results provide strong evidence of perceived superiority. Thirteen of the fourteen pairs of means differ in the expected direction and, often, the differences are substantial,

approaching—and sometimes exceeding—one full-point on the 7-point response scale (see the first of the two right-most columns for the mean difference scores and their associated standard deviations). With the exception of the attribute “have compatible interests,” participants perceived each of the alleged markers of relationship success as more typical of their own dating relationship than the average dating relationship.

A closer examination of Table 1, however, reveals marked variation in the magnitude of the differences between mean ratings on the average and own relationship scales. Interestingly, several of the largest differences were observed in association with those attributes whose connection with relationship success are based (we contend) more on stereotype than scientific fact. The most dramatic example of this is found in participants’ views concerning the extent to which they and their partner—as opposed to the average couple—“know what the other’s really thinking most of the time.” Participants were somewhat disinclined to believe that the average couple enjoys the ability to read each other’s minds ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.35$), but felt fairly certain that they and their partner share this special talent ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.21$). Differences in ratings for the attributes “feel completely satisfied with their relationship” and “are happy with each other ‘just the way we are’” were also quite large (each well over one full-point on the 7-point scale), despite the rather unrealistic portrait of the anatomy of a successful relationship that these items paint. Average-own discrepancies were more modest for the remaining attributes in the RSP (excluding the item for which no significant difference was observed), ranging from a low of .50 to a high of .92.

In sum, the present results replicate previous research. Participants in the present study viewed their relationships in comparatively indulgent terms, rating features (ostensibly) diagnostic of relational success significantly more characteristic of their own than of the average

dating relationship. Importantly, however, the present results also extend past findings by highlighting the possibility that perceived superiority may vary in magnitude, even when the dimensions under examination are related (i.e., markers of relational success). Consistent with the rationale that led us to investigate perceived superiority at the level of the individual belief, this latter observation suggests that there may be value in considering the nature or content of relational beliefs for which people demonstrate perceived superiority.

Markers of Success and Differentiating Between the Views of Participants in Moderately- and Highly-Satisfied Relationships

The assessment task we used to gauge perceived superiority contains an implicit assumption that some attributes of a relationship better predict the healthy growth and development of a relationship than others. To test this notion in the context of judgments reflecting participants’ tendencies toward perceived superiority, we conducted a set of discriminant function analyses to examine which of the relationship attributes in the RSP best separated the responses of participants on the basis of their self-reported level of relationship satisfaction. For purposes of these analyses, we divided our sample into two roughly equal groups on the basis of a modified median split (we excluded 12 participants from these analyses because their scores fell on the median for relationship satisfaction, $mdn = 6$). Participants scoring 5.9 or below on the satisfaction index ($n = 18$) were assigned to a “moderately-satisfied” group and those scoring 6.1 or higher were assigned to a “highly-satisfied” group ($n = 20$). Responses to the 14 items in the average and own relationships scales of the RSP served (in separate analyses) as the predictor variables and satisfaction group (moderately- vs. highly-satisfied) served as the criterion.

Interestingly, the results indicate that individuals in moderately- and highly-satisfied relationships differed only in their ratings of their own relationships and not in their ratings of the average relationship. Whereas the maximally discriminating linear combination of relationship attributes failed to distinguish between groups ($p > .05$) in analysis of participants' responses to the average relationship scale, the comparable linear combination for the own relationship scale was significant, $\chi^2(14, N = 38) = 29.80, p < .01$. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis, including relevant descriptive statistics and structure coefficients for each attribute reported separately by group.

The four largest structure coefficients (in descending order of magnitude) were associated with the attributes "share with each other," "feel completely satisfied with our relationship," "believe that the relationship will succeed," and "are truly responsive to each others' needs." We think it is hardly surprising that attributes reflecting feelings of satisfaction with the relationship (particularly *complete* satisfaction with the relationship) and confidence that it will succeed discriminate well between the happiest individuals in our sample and those whose level of relationship satisfaction is more moderate. It also makes considerable sense to us that individuals in highly-satisfied relationships would report greater mutual responsiveness in their relationships than would those in less satisfied relationships. A partner's willingness to respond to one's needs—and one's willingness to reciprocate by responding to a partner's needs—has long been considered a hallmark of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988) and a cornerstone for the development of both trust (Holmes, 1991) and a secure attachment bond between partners (Bowlby, 1982). However, the explanation underlying the apparent discriminating power of sharing is much less obvious to us. Perhaps the finding that the happiest group endorsed these two attributes more strongly than their more moderately-satisfied peers is an indication that more

attention needs to be paid to people's perceptions of the extent to which they and their romantic partners are willing to offer each other free access to resources they would normally consider their own, that is, to give up exclusive control over property, possessions, and other commodities they bring to the relationship.

Completing the roster of items that highly satisfied individuals rated as more characteristic of their relationships than did individuals who were moderately-satisfied with their relationships are items stating that partners "are happy with each other 'just the way they are,'" "have truly compatible personalities" and "compatible interests," and "are confident depending on one another." Although our reasoning here is speculative, this pattern of results suggests to us that participants who reported the happiest relationships may see more of themselves in their partners than do participants in the more moderately-satisfied group, thus perceiving greater compatibility in their relationships and less need for either change in their partner or wariness in their interactions.

Non-discriminating items (as indicated by structure coefficients below .30) included "handle conflict constructively," "know what each other's really thinking most of the time," "able to communicate effectively about relationship anxieties and concerns," "share the same life-goals," and "agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations" (the reader may note that the univariate F -statistics for the non-discriminating items suggest that most of these attributes do differ between groups. It is important to remember, however, that these univariate tests do not take into consideration the correlations among items. As the mean inter-item correlations for the average and own relationship subscales are .36 and .40, respectively, the results of these ANOVAs are not independent and should be considered with caution). We will have more to say about these items and the implications of the finding that they do not

discriminate between the highly- and moderately-satisfied groups in the discussion. For now, suffice it to say that, in general, both groups saw these attributes as reasonably characteristic of their own relationships.

In sum, the present analyses demonstrate that some—but not all—of the putative markers of success differentiated between the responses of our happiest and less happy participants. In fact, the pattern of results is rather complicated, with ratings for the own relationship scale of the RSP discriminating between the moderately- and highly-satisfied groups whereas ratings for the average relationship scale did not. We discuss the implications of these complex findings for our understanding of perceived superiority below.

Discussion

Demonstrating Perceived Superiority

Whether we aggregate responses across each of the scales of the Relationship Success Profile or examine responses to each of the items in these scales individually, the present data provide clear and consistent evidence of perceived superiority. With a single noteworthy exception, participants rated each of the 14 putative markers of success substantially more characteristic of their own than of the average dating relationship. In particular, they reported that they and their partner—more than other couples—know what the other’s really thinking most of the time, have truly compatible personalities, are happy with each other just the way they are, communicate effectively about their relationship anxieties and concerns, feel completely satisfied with their relationships, keep their promises to each other, share the same life-goals, are truly responsive to each other’s needs and confident depending on each other, handle conflict constructively, share with each other, agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations, and believe their relationships will succeed. In short, in much the same

way that previous research has shown that individuals tend to idealize their own partners compared to the typical partner and consistent with findings that people tend to hold more positive beliefs about their own relationships than about others’ relationships, participants in the present study viewed their own relationships as uniquely advantaged—compared to the average dating relationship—in the extent to which they possessed a number of characteristics ostensibly predictive of relational success. The present findings thus demonstrate that the tendency to view one’s own partner and relationship in an indulgent, excessively positive fashion generalizes beyond the contexts in which such tendencies have been documented to date to include as well judgments concerning those relationship attributes that predict healthy relationship growth and development.

We think this is important for at least two reasons. First, and most generally, the bulk of research in this area has emerged from the collaborative work of two groups of investigators and utilizes one of two basic protocols for assessing perceived superiority (e.g., Murray et al.’s partner rating task and Van Lange and Rusbult’s thought-listing task). Under these circumstances, we think there is considerable value in demonstrating that others can replicate the pattern of findings in other laboratories using other procedures. That we obtained evidence of perceived superiority using a novel assessment task thus bolsters the evidence supporting the generality of this particular form of positive illusion, adding to a small number of studies conducted outside the two laboratories in which most of this research has been done (e.g., Buunk & van der Eijnden, 1997; Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Taylor & Hall, 1976).

In addition, and of greater theoretical consequence, our emphasis on perceived superiority as manifested in people’s beliefs concerning relationship attributes that predict

success is a logical extension of research and theory linking perceived superiority to relationship maintenance and the construction of confidence. As we discussed in the introduction, several recent studies have shown that tendencies to view one's relationship in ways that accentuate the positive predict relationship stability and both concurrent and later relationship satisfaction. Such findings substantiate claims that perceived superiority serves important relationship-enhancing functions that may enable intimates to weather the inevitable storms that arise as they pursue their individual and joint goals over time. To date, however, evidence documenting the relational benefits of perceived superiority has not been accompanied by complementary evidence demonstrating that people hold inflated perceptions of the extent to which their relationships are poised to achieve success. That is, although researchers have shown that perceived superiority is positively associated with relational outcomes diagnostic of success, investigators have yet to address an important question that follows from this body of research: If in fact perceived superiority promotes relationship maintenance and helps to resolve the conflict between individuals' hopes and fears about their relational futures, do individuals exhibit perceived superiority along dimensions pertaining directly to relational success?

The results of the present study provide initial support for the hypothesis that people are, indeed, motivated to exaggerate the extent to which their relationships possess those attributes that augur well for success. Despite the range of attributes in the Relationship Success Profile and in the face of considerable variation across attributes in the validity of the claim that they forecast healthy relationship growth and development, participants consistently rated the various markers of success more typical of their own dating relationships than of the average dating relationship. Further research is needed to demonstrate that this pattern of own-relationship-enhancing ratings reflects *motivated* processing. Nevertheless, the present findings effectively

demonstrate that people believe that they and their partner outshine the average couple in terms of the degree to which they possess attributes indicative of relationship success.

Levels of Analysis: The Value in Exploring Perceived Superiority at the Level of the Individual Belief

In addition to using a novel assessment task, the present study is also unique in investigating perceived superiority at a different level of analysis. Most researchers who study perceived superiority analyze their data by collapsing across multiple ratings of a partner's personality traits or lists of thoughts about a relationship. In this study, we approached the analysis of our data from a different angle, focusing our attention on differences in ratings at the level of the individual belief or, more accurately, the individual relationship attribute.

The pattern of results we obtained suggests that this move was fortuitous. Despite the remarkable consistency with which participants judged the various markers of success more typical of their own than the average relationship, we also observed substantial variation in the magnitude of the differences obtained between ratings for the two target relationships. In fact, at up to 1.5 scale points, the largest differences were nearly three times the size of the smallest differences, which hovered closer to .50. Had we followed the lead of other researchers and examined perceived superiority only at the level of mean ratings calculated across the 14 items in each of the RSP scales, this variability in responses would have remained undetected.

Buunk and van der Eijnden (1997) have argued that the tendency to view one's own relationship in an unrealistic and unduly positive fashion can co-exist with the apparently contradictory tendency to view one's own relationship as similar to most other relationships. It may be that the observed variation in perceived superiority in the present study reflects the joint occurrence of these two tendencies (see also Van Lange et al., 1999). The largest differences

would suggest the existence of relational attributes that pull more strongly for perceived superiority than for false consensus (i.e., for which people are inclined to exaggerate the superiority of their own relationships and downplay the similarity of their relationship to other relationships), whereas the smallest differences would suggest the existence of attributes for which the strength of the two tendencies is, relatively speaking, more equal (i.e., for which, though still inclined to view their own relationships as better than others' relationships, people are simultaneously inclined to view their relationships as rather more similar to others' than different).

The variability in the differences between participants' ratings of the two target relationships might also indicate that people see corresponding differences in the extent to which their own relationships surpass the average relationship along the dimensions we examined. Such differences might stem in part from variations in the ease with which individuals are able to recruit, generate, or construct evidence to support the illusion of superiority on certain dimensions. Consistent with this possibility, Murray (1999) has argued that, despite the existence of opportunities for exercising considerable latitude in construing a partner and his or her behavior, intimates are not free to believe anything they want about their relationships. Reality usually poses some constraints on individuals' freedom to interpret the evidence at hand (see also Kunda, 1990). Perhaps participants in the present study felt that they could more easily justify high typicality ratings for some of the markers of success than for others. This may have led them to modulate their ratings on the own relationship subscale accordingly.

Determining which—if either—of these explanations best accounts for the observed variability in the magnitude of perceived superiority will require further research. The present results nevertheless highlight the value in examining perceived superiority at the level of the

individual belief. Measures of perceived superiority that aggregate across multiple ratings or thoughts may obscure important variation in the extent to which individuals perceive their relationships as better than others. We hope to examine the underpinnings of this variation in our future research.

Markers of Success and Differentiating Between Moderately- and Very-Satisfied Participants

In our view, one of the most interesting results of the present study is the finding that ratings on the average relationship scale of the RSP did not distinguish between participants who differed in their self-reported relationship satisfaction. That is, the happiest participants in our sample were neither more—nor less—inclined to disparage the average dating relationship than were moderately happy participants. Instead, both groups of participants were rather uniformly positive in their evaluations of the average relationship. In all cases but one (the item “know what the other's really thinking most of the time”), mean ratings for both groups exceeded the scale midpoint, indicating that participants considered the various markers of success at least somewhat typical of the average relationship.

This is not, of course, what we might have expected to find. On the one hand, we might have expected that the most satisfied participants in our sample would report significantly more favorable impressions of the average relationship than our more moderately satisfied participants. Specifically, if highly satisfied participants projected their assessments of their own very successful relationships onto their judgments of others' relationships, we would expect them to have provided higher typicality ratings for the various markers of success for the average relationship scale than would more moderately-satisfied participants. In other words, we might have expected their “rosy” impressions of their own prospects for success to color their impressions of the average couple's prospects. On the other hand, to the extent that perceived

superiority reflects motivated processes, the happiest participants might instead possess gloomier views of the average relationship than their more moderately happy counterparts. That is, very satisfied participants might maintain their illusion of superiority in part by exaggerating how “bad” the average relationship is. If this tendency to disparage the average relationship increases the more individuals feel satisfied with their own relationships (even if only because more moderately satisfied individuals would likely see less difference between their own and the average relationship than would the most satisfied individuals), we would have expected highly satisfied participants to rate the markers of success significantly less characteristic of the average relationship than their more moderately-satisfied counterparts.

In actuality, neither of these patterns of results was observed. Instead, ratings on the average relationship subscale did not vary by relationship satisfaction. Considered together with the finding that ratings on the own relationship subscale *did* reliably discriminate between these groups, the present results suggest to us that, however much variation in perceived superiority may predict differences in relationship satisfaction, people’s satisfaction with their relationships may be more firmly anchored in perceptions of their *own* relationships’ potential for success than in their perceptions of *others’* relationships’ potential. In other words, individuals’ perceptions of the relative position of their own relationships vis a vis the average relationship may be less important in predicting their level of relationship satisfaction than their perceptions regarding the absolute position of their own relationships along dimensions diagnostic of success.

The present data provide some support for this speculation. In a series of bivariate regressions, we regressed participants’ relationship satisfaction scores on three different predictors: mean ratings on the average relationship scale and the own relationship scale, and a difference score computed by subtracting mean average scale scores from mean own scale

scores. Own relationship scores and the difference score predicted significant variation in relationship satisfaction but scores on the average relationship scale did not, $r^2 = .008$, $F(1, 50) = .38$, *n.s.* In addition, own scale scores predicted more variation in relationship satisfaction than the difference score, $r^2 = .63$, $F(1, 50) = 85.28$, $p < .001$ and $r^2 = .30$, $F(1, 50) = 21.68$, $p < .001$, for the own scale and difference score, respectively.

We were also interested to find that, for ratings of the attributes in the own relationship scale, some of the markers of success were more useful than others in distinguishing between participants who were very happy with their current relationships and those who were more moderately happy. We discussed the attributes that contributed to the task of discriminating between these groups in the results section. For several of these (i.e., the attributes with the largest structure coefficients), the link between self-reported relationship satisfaction and prognostications concerning characteristics that bode well for success are obvious (e.g., it’s no surprise that participants in our highly-satisfied group more strongly endorsed the item “believe that the relationship will succeed” than more moderately-satisfied participants). Here we’d like to focus our attention on the five items that did not discriminate well, attributes asserting that partners in successful relationships handle conflict constructively, know what each others’ really thinking most of the time, communicate effectively about their anxieties and concerns about their relationships, share the same life-goals, and agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations.

We are not certain why these particular attributes failed to distinguish between the two relationship satisfaction groups. Two possible explanations come to mind, however. One is statistical: A quick glance at the standard deviations associated with the five non-discriminating attributes suggests that participants’ ratings for several of these attributes may have been more

variable, on average, than their ratings for the remaining attributes. Collapsing across groups, the standard deviations for three of these five attributes (the attributes concerning conflict, communication, and closeness) are the largest standard deviations observed across the full set of attributes. The two remaining non-discriminating attributes are remarkable for the amount of variability evident in the responses of the *highly satisfied group*. Compared to the variability observed in highly satisfied participants' ratings of the discriminating attributes, there is much greater spread in their ratings for these particular non-discriminating attributes (i.e., the attributes concerning life-goals and knowing what each other's thinking). Perhaps the five non-discriminating items are somewhat unique, then, in that participants vary more widely in the extent to which they see them as true of their own relationships. This added variability might weaken their power to discriminate between groups.

Why might ratings for the non-discriminating attributes be more variable than ratings for the discriminating attributes? Our second explanation suggests one possibility. We suggested earlier that participants might find it easier to generate evidence to support illusions of superiority concerning some of the attributes in the RSP than for others (hence the variation in the magnitude of perceived superiority we observed across the set of attributes). Perhaps the non-discriminating items posed more difficulty for participants in this respect than the discriminating items did. Of course, this explanation makes sense (i.e., accounts for the failure of these attributes to discriminate between groups) only if we further suppose that highly satisfied participants felt more constrained in their assessments of their own relationships than did their more moderately-satisfied counterparts.

Alternatively, perhaps participants "didn't buy" our assertion that the non-discriminating attributes predict relationship success. If they did not, it is not clear that they would be

motivated to endorse these attributes as typical of their relationships. More to the point, if participants doubted our claim that these particular attributes are diagnostic of relationship success, there is no reason to believe highly satisfied participants would view them as any more characteristic of their relationships than would those less satisfied with their relationships. Certainly such skepticism could have increased the variability in participants' responses to these items. But quite independent of any effect such doubt would have on the variability of responses, it might attenuate differences between groups and thus impair the ability of these attributes to discriminate between participants on the basis of their relationship satisfaction.

The fact that the largest difference score (i.e., between means on the two subscales) is associated with one of the attributes whose connection with healthy relationship growth and development is most specious (i.e., the attribute "know what each other's thinking most of the time;" see Table 1) is problematic for this account. However, the remaining four non-discriminating items were associated with considerably more moderate difference scores, suggesting that there may be some merit to the notion that participants questioned the predictive utility of some of the putative markers of success.

Future research might proceed by identifying actual markers of success (i.e., as documented in the relevant literatures) and constructing an assessment task based on these empirically-derived relationship attributes. The results might be even more interesting, however, if the list of attributes included laypeople's stereotypes and common-sense notions concerning the types of relationship attributes that predict success, as well (i.e., as determined through pilot-testing). Do tendencies to view one's own relationship in an unduly positive fashion vary as a function of whether the attribute's connection with success is based in fact or fiction? And which type of attribute—those derived from scientific investigation versus those based in popular

understandings of what makes a relationship successful—best discriminates between individuals on the basis of their self-reported relationship satisfaction?

Limitations

As we see it, the main limitations of the present study hinge on the nature of our sample and the RSP task. Not only did women substantially outnumber men in our sample, but our participants were involved in very satisfying dating relationships, as well. It is difficult to know how the peculiarities of this particular group of participants may have affected our results, but it is clear that the present research needs to be replicated with less homogeneous samples.

Our choice of assessment tasks also bears some discussion. Using the RSP to assess perceived superiority may have had the somewhat inadvertent but noteworthy consequence of providing an impetus for motivated processing not normally present in measures of this construct. Specifically, structured as it is around relational attributes that allegedly serve as prognostic indicators of future relational well-being, the RSP may pull for biased social comparison to a greater degree than do other methods researchers have used to examine perceived superiority in the past. In some sense, then, our decision to focus on judgments about attributes that augur well for relationship success may have stacked the deck in favor of finding evidence of perceived superiority in the present study, increasing the odds that we would replicate tendencies for participants to evaluate their own relationships in an idealized fashion. Of course, given that perceived superiority is commonly viewed as the result of motivated patterns of processing, some might consider the possibility that our assessment task may itself have elicited desires to perceive one's relationship in a complimentary fashion a strength—not a limitation—of this investigation.

It is also worth noting that Van Lange and Rusbult (1995) describe four types of perceived superiority. The present research examines just one of these—positive superiority, or the tendency to hold unduly complimentary views about one's own relationships compared to others' relationships. Neither own relationship positivity nor other relationship negativity are relevant to the present investigation as both pertain to the quantity of information an individual offers concerning his or her own or others' relationships. In addition, the evidence for negative superiority, or the tendency to see one's own relationship as less negative than others' relationships, is somewhat less consistent than the evidence for positive superiority (see Rusbult, Van Lange, Verette, & Yovetich, 1995). Nevertheless, we think it is an important limitation of this study that the RSP includes no attributes that would allow us to examine tendencies toward negative superiority, or the tendency to hold unduly negative views of others' relationships compared to one's own. Accordingly, in our future research, we plan to modify the RSP to include attributes that we might call here "markers of relationship failure." This will allow us to determine whether the pattern of findings we observed in the present analyses will generalize when attributes diagnostic of relationship "disaster" are included in the RSP, as well. Of particular interest may be whether markers of success or markers of failure differentiate better between highly satisfied and more moderately-satisfied individuals.

Conclusion

The present results indicate that intimates hold exaggerated views about the extent to which their own relationships possess attributes allegedly diagnostic of relationship success. Such findings add to the growing literature on perceived superiority and suggest a number of new and interesting directions that future research in this area might take. We hope this paper

will inspire other researchers to join us in investigating people's beliefs about how their own relationships compare to others' relationships when they evaluate their future prospects.

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Table 1
 Descriptive Statistics for the Individual Items of the Relationship Success Profile (N = 52)

Item	Target relationship			F(1,51)
	Average	Own	Differenc e	
Handle conflict constructively	4.50 (1.28)	5.21 (1.36)	0.71 (1.79)	8.25**
Are happy with each other "just the way they(we) are"	4.39 (1.48)	5.56 (1.04)	1.17 (1.64)	26.55***
Share with each other	5.65 (0.95)	6.31 (0.85)	0.65 (1.24)	14.58***
Know what the other's really thinking most of the time	3.67 (1.35)	5.14 (1.21)	1.46 (1.60)	43.27***
Feel completely satisfied with their(our) relationship	4.44 (1.18)	5.53 (1.46)	1.10 (1.70)	21.75***
Have truly compatible personalities	3.75 (1.22)	5.01 (1.40)	1.35 (1.96)	24.55***
Are able to communicate effectively about relationship anxieties and concerns	4.19 (1.51)	5.35 (1.49)	1.15 (2.00)	17.24***
Have compatible interests	5.19 (0.86)	5.17 (1.44)	-0.02 (1.60)	.01

table continues

Item	Target relationship		Difference	F(1, 51)
	Average	Own		
Keep their promises to each other	5.12 (1.18)	6.04 (1.05)	0.92 (1.47)	20.60***
Share the same life-goals (i.e., marriage, careers)	4.79 (1.18)	5.65 (1.36)	0.87 (1.36)	21.12***
Agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations	4.85 (1.18)	5.48 (1.51)	0.64 (1.43)	10.26**
Are truly responsive to each other's needs	4.90 (1.23)	5.75 (1.24)	0.85 (1.53)	15.99***
Believe that the relationship will succeed	5.42 (1.00)	5.92 (1.28)	0.50 (1.52)	5.67*
Are confident depending on one another	5.20 (1.13)	5.98 (1.18)	0.78 (1.32)	18.11***
Total Scale	4.72 (0.77)	5.59 (0.84)	0.87 (1.10)	32.65***

Note. Difference scores reported in this table represent the mean of the difference scores computed across the individual participants (this method of calculation allowed us to obtain data concerning the standard deviation of the differences). Slight deviations between these values and difference scores computed using the means for the individual items are attributable to rounding error.

$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Group Means (by Satisfaction Level), Structure Coefficients, and Univariate F's for Items in the Own Relationship Subscale (N = 38)

Item	Satisfaction level		Structure coefficient	Univariate F (1, 34)
	Moderate	High		
	(n = 18)	(n = 20)		
Handle conflict constructively	4.56 (1.34)	5.55 (1.61)	.26	4.25*
Are happy with each other "just the way we are"	5.00 (1.24)	5.95 (0.89)	.34	7.52**
Share with each other	5.56 (0.92)	6.80 (0.41)	.68	29.93***
Know what the other's really thinking most of the time	4.72 (1.36)	5.50 (1.05)	.25	3.92+
Feel completely satisfied with our relationship	4.39 (1.58)	6.45 (0.76)	.65	27.22***
Have truly compatible personalities	4.28 (1.53)	5.55 (1.10)	.37	8.82**
Able to communicate effectively about relationship anxieties and concerns	4.67 (1.50)	5.70 (1.59)	.26	4.22*

table continues

Item	Satisfaction level		Structure coefficient	Univariate <i>F</i> <i>F</i> (1, 34)
	Moderate (<i>n</i> = 18)	High (<i>n</i> = 20)		
Have compatible interests	4.56 (1.62)	5.75 (1.21)	.32	6.74*
Keep our promises to each other	5.44 (1.29)	6.35 (0.81)	.33	6.82*
Share the same life-goals (i.e., marriage, careers)	5.06 (1.43)	5.95 (1.19)	.26	4.40*
Agree on the level of closeness appropriate to different situations	5.00 (1.61)	5.90 (1.62)	.21	2.95+
Are truly responsive to each other's needs	4.83 (1.29)	6.40 (0.82)	.56	20.27***
Believe that the relationship will succeed	4.88 (1.45)	6.68 (0.49)	.64	26.23***
Are confident depending on one another	5.24 (1.38)	6.58 (0.69)	.49	15.75***
Canonical Correlation	0.80			
Eigenvalue	1.79			
Group Centroids	-1.37	1.24		

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses below means.

+*p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.