

SELF-ENHANCEMENT PROCESSES IN COUPLES

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Self-enhancement is a process by which individuals misperceive themselves by viewing themselves in a positively biased manner. Past research indicates that self-enhancement can have both positive and negative effects on romantic relationships. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role of self-enhancement in unmarried dating couples ($N = 124$ couples; 248 individuals) with respect to conflict, dyadic adjustment, causal and responsibility attributions, and possible moderators between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. The results are organized in four sections. First, I found a curvilinear relationship between participant self-enhancement and conflict. At very low and very high levels of self-enhancement there were increased levels of conflict. Second, participant self-enhancement was positively associated with increased participant dyadic adjustment, but there was no relationship between participant self-enhancement and partner dyadic adjustment. Third, there was no relationship between participant self-enhancement and causal and responsibility attributions. Fourth, forgiveness and commitment did not moderate the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment; however, there were main effects for both forgiveness and commitment - both forgiveness and commitment were positively associated with dyadic adjustment. I conclude by discussing limitations, areas of future research, and implications for counseling.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| LIST OF TABLES | vi |
| LIST OF FIGURES | vii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE | 2 |
| Purpose of Current Review | |
| Method | |
| Results | |
| Discussion | |
| 3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM | 24 |
| Self-Enhancement in Couples | |
| Moderators of Self-Enhancement and Relationship Outcomes | |
| Purpose of the Current Study | |
| 4. METHOD | 31 |
| Participants | |
| Design | |
| Measures | |
| Procedure | |
| Hypotheses and Planned Analyses | |
| 5. RESULTS | 45 |
| Testing for Assumptions | |
| Preliminary Analyses | |
| Hypothesis 1 | |
| Hypothesis 2 | |
| Hypothesis 3 | |
| Hypothesis 4 | |
| Hypothesis 5 | |

6. DISCUSSION 51

- Self-Enhancement and Relationship Conflict
- Self-Enhancement and Dyadic Adjustment
- Self-Enhancement and Attribution
- Moderators of the Relationship between Self-Enhancement and Dyadic Adjustment
- Limitations
- Areas for Future Research
- Implications for Counseling
- Conclusion

LIST OF REFERENCES 76

LIST OF TABLES

| | Page |
|--|------|
| 1. Self-enhancement in Couples..... | 64 |
| 2. Demographic Statistics..... | 68 |
| 3. Descriptive Statistics..... | 69 |
| 4. Correlations – Gender Combined..... | 70 |
| 5. Correlations – Separated by Gender..... | 71 |
| 6. Preliminary Analyses – LGBTQIA+ Individuals vs. Non- LGBTQIA+ Individuals..... | 72 |
| 7. Preliminary Analyses – Heterosexual Couples vs. Non- Heterosexual & Mixed Couples..... | 73 |
| 8. Preliminary Analyses – Males vs. Females..... | 74 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | Page |
|--|------|
| 1. The curvilinear effect of self-enhancement and relationship conflict..... | 75 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The field of romantic relationships is a heavily studied area in psychology (Dunbar, 2012; Gottschall & Nordlund, 2006; Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992). Romantic relationships have been shown to have positive effects on individual well-being (Proulx et al., 2007); however, romantic relationships also have the potential to negatively affect health and well-being when they deteriorate (Coleman & Glenn, 2009). Self-enhancement is a process by which individuals misperceive themselves by viewing themselves with a positive bias. (Taylor & Brown 1988, 1994). Self-enhancement is an understudied construct in the context of romantic relationships that could influence the manner in which romantic partners relate to one another and resolve conflict.

There has been some research conducted on self-enhancement processes in couples, which have yielded mixed findings. Research evidence suggests that self-enhancement can lead to both positive and negative effects on romantic partners and romantic relationships. To this point, no comprehensive literature review exists examining the effects of self-enhancement in couples.

This dissertation focuses on examining how self-enhancement processes affect couples. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature for self-enhancement in couples. Specifically, I review all empirical studies that studied self-enhancement in the context of romantic relationships, and examine possible variables that moderate the effects of self-enhancement. In Chapters 3, 4, 5, I present an empirical study that explores how self-enhancement processes in couples are associated with relationship outcomes, conflict, and attribution. Additionally, I examine whether or not forgiveness and relationship commitment act as possible moderators of the relationship between self-enhancement and relationship satisfaction. In Chapter 6, I discuss the findings from my empirical study in the context of the existing literature.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile.

Franklin P. Jones

Romantic love is thought to be universal human emotion that pervades cultural boundaries and has been evidenced in some of the earliest human oral and written records (Dunbar, 2012; Gottschall & Nordlund, 2006; Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992). The dependence that accompanies romantic love requires a great deal of investment and is theorized to be largely related to improved survivability of offspring with two parents present (Geary, 2000). There appears to be additional benefits for this time investment, as evidence suggests that being romantically involved with another person can lead to beneficial effects, particularly for individual well-being (Proulx et al., 2007). Well-being varies based on relationship status, with married couples experiencing the highest levels of well-being, followed by cohabitating couples, those in steady relationships, casual relationships, and individuals without partners (Dush & Amato, 2005). There is also evidence that being involved in a romantic relationship is related to having a longer lifespan and better physical health. Specifically, married individuals have greater life expectancies than unmarried people and are less prone to serious illnesses (Kaplan & Kronick, 2006), although this benefit affects men more so than women (Eaker et al, 2007; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Evolutionarily, romantic relationships are theorized to be adaptive partnerships that ensure that partners support one another and any subsequent offspring (Gonzaga & Haselton, 2008).

Although there are several benefits to romantic relationships, they are not without pain and struggle. For example, nearly 20% to 40% of married individuals from the United States

report engaging in extramarital affairs at some point in their marriage (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Infidelity has been shown to be associated with increased marital distress, conflict, and divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Charny & Parnass, 1995). Not all marriages succeed. In the United States, approximately 43% to 46 % of marriages end in divorce (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Dissolution of romantic relationships has been shown to be associated with increased rates of mortality, physical and mental illness, health-damaging behaviors, and slower recovery from illness (Coleman & Glenn, 2009). Also, even for couples that do stay together, they likely will experience levels of conflict that are detrimental to their individual well-being and the well-being of their relationship. In general, relationship conflict is a stressor that can, over time, reduce relational quality and stability (Kline, Pleasant, Whitton, & Markman, 2006). Given the potential for romantic relationships to lead to benefits as well as pain and struggle, it is important to investigate factors that lead to more positive romantic relationships.

One understudied aspect of romantic relationships involves how individuals view themselves. Interestingly, human beings are not always accurate in their views of themselves. Self-enhancement is a process by which individuals misperceive themselves in an overly positive manner. According to Taylor and Brown's (1988) review of the literature, self-enhancement appears to entail two processes: (1) individuals hold inaccurate views of themselves and (2) typically these biases are advantageous to the self. There is research support to indicate that individuals generally self-enhance in comparison to average others (Taylor & Brown 1988, 1994) and self-enhancement can occur by either (a) attaching positive attributes to themselves or (b) downplaying negative attributes and emphasizing positive traits. It is theorized that humans self-enhance to protect their self-esteem, defending against information that would otherwise disconfirm positive beliefs about themselves.

Self-enhancement has been shown to have several benefits for the individual, including higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that self-enhancement is related to feeling good about oneself, creating relationships, having a higher capacity for creative work, and being able to achieve long-term goals (Taylor et al., 2003). Self-enhancement also appears to have a positive relationship with the tendency to cooperate with others (Otter et al., 2007; Surbey, 2011) and the ability to engage in positive coping methods (Neckar, 2013).

Although self-enhancement has some benefits, there are also drawbacks, including being perceived by others as self-absorbed or lacking empathy (Paulhus, 1998). The negative effects of self-enhancement have been demonstrated over time (e.g., 4 years), as individuals who were considered to be high self-enhancers were evaluated as less liked by their peers compared to low self-enhancers (Colvin et al., 1995). Self-enhancement is also related to higher levels of risk-taking (Baumeister et al., 1993), ineffective planning (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2002), and poor coping styles (Neckar, 2013).

There has been a plethora of research on self-enhancement in individuals, but there has been less research on the effects of self-enhancement in couple relationships. However, there may be several reasons why self-enhancement may have positive benefits for couples. First, self-enhancement is motivated by the need to maintain self-esteem (Sedikides & Strube, 1995). Individual self-esteem has been shown to be significantly and positively correlated with romantic relationship satisfaction (Cramer, 2003), so to the degree that self-enhancement helps maintain high levels of self-esteem, it may be associated with more positive relationship outcomes. Second, research indicates that romantic relationship maintenance behaviors are related to positive relationship outcomes (Epstein et al., 2013). Given that self-enhancement is an internal

self-esteem maintenance-mechanism, perhaps those regulatory behaviors are transferable to one's romantic relationship when self-enhancement is high. Thus, self-enhancement may positively affect relationship outcomes via relationship maintenance behaviors.

Although self-enhancement may have positive effects on relationship outcomes, there are also reasons why self-enhancement might be negatively related to relationship outcomes. In regard to self-esteem, some have theorized that self-enhancement is a process by which the individual is able to improve their self-esteem at the cost of evaluating oneself favorably to others (Taylor & Brown 1988, 1994). It is possible that within a romantic relationship, a self-enhancer may self-enhance by downgrading their evaluation of their romantic partner. Such negative evaluations could lead to dysfunctional conflict and relationship disharmony. Relationship harming behaviors (e.g., criticism) have been shown to be predictive of divorce in married couples (Gottman, 1999). Therefore, it is possible that self-enhancement could also be harmful to one's partner and the romantic relationship itself.

Self-enhancement in couples may vary based on the gender of the partner, as well as the cultural background of the couple. In regard to gender, self-enhancement may be affected by the gender norms that each partner is influenced by. Due to gender norms in which girls are socialized to be modest (Bronstein, 2006; Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002), it may be more culturally acceptable for men to self-enhance or brag than for women. Also, self-enhancement may present differently for men vs. women. For example, research has shown that men tend to focus more on intrapersonal traits, whereas women tend to focus more on relational connections (Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, men may be more likely to self-enhance on intrapersonal traits, whereas women may be more likely to self-enhance on interpersonal traits.

Similarly, cultural norms may influence levels of self-enhancement or how self-enhancement is expressed. For example, individuals from individualistic cultures may be more likely to self-enhance (or self-enhance differently) than individuals from collectivistic cultures. While previous research has exhibited robust findings of self-enhancement in Western cultures (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988), there is much less evidence for self-enhancement in Eastern cultures (e.g., Heine & Lehman, 1995, 1997, 1999). The measurement of self-enhancement in Eastern cultures has been traditionally carried out in a similar fashion to studies conducted on Western cultures, at an individual or intrapersonal level. Individuals in Eastern cultures may be more likely to self-enhance in regard to their culture and relationships, whereas individuals in Western cultures may be more likely to self-enhance in regard to the self.

Purpose of Current Review

The purpose of the current literature review is to (a) summarize the results from empirical studies that examined self-enhancement in the context of romantic relationships, (b) highlight developing trends in this area of research, and (c) explore possible mediators and moderators between self-enhancement and other variables. This review (a) focused on studies measuring self-enhancement, (b) described the methodology of the studies, and (c) explored ways that future research could address limitations in the current findings. Based on previous research, I hypothesized that there would be evidence of self-enhancement in the majority of the studies included. I also hypothesized that these findings would find both positive and negative outcomes related to self-enhancement in couples. Finally, I explored whether demographic variables such as gender or culture would influence self-enhancement in the context of couples.

Method

I conducted a literature search of empirical journal articles, dissertations, and theses that examined self-enhancement in the context of couples and romantic relationships. The inclusion criteria for this literature search included several aspects. First, the included studies were empirical. Theoretical articles or case studies were not included. Second, the included studies actually measured self-enhancement in some manner. Third, the included studies examined self-enhancement in the context of couples, romantic relationships, or married individuals. Fourth, only one effect size per data set was included in the present review. If there were multiple papers from one data set (e.g., published journal article and dissertation), I gave preference to peer-reviewed journal articles over dissertations. It should be noted that some studies measured partner enhancement and argued that partner enhancement was an indirect way to measure self-enhancement. However, in the present literature review, I viewed partner enhancement as a distinct construct from self-enhancement. Studies that measured partner enhancement, but did not directly measure self-enhancement, were excluded from the present review.

I conducted the literature search through July 7, 2015, and the search had two main components. First, I searched three online databases: Psycinfo, Pubmed, and Proquest Dissertations and Theses. I used the search terms “self enhancement*” and “couple*,” “self enhancement*” and “romantic relat*,” and “self enhancement*” and “marri*” in all three databases. This search yielded 137 results (Psycinfo – 109; Pubmed – 10; Proquest Dissertations and Theses – 18). Of these manuscripts, 19 met inclusion criteria for the literature review. Second, I reviewed the discussion and reference sections of each of these studies and found 3 additional studies that met inclusion criteria. Thus, I found a total of 22 studies that examined

self-enhancement in the context of couples. Two studies used the same dataset, so there were 21 independent samples that examined self-enhancement in the context of couples.

Results

The review of the literature on self-enhancement in the context of couples is organized into two sections. First, I review the methods used in the primary studies. Second, I review the empirical findings on self-enhancement in the context of couples.

Methods Used in Primary Studies

Participants. The total number of participants from the 21 studies was $N = 20,533$. The mean age across samples was $M = 27.70$. About half the studies used undergraduate samples (55%; $n = 12$). The other studies sampled from various other populations, such as newlyweds, married couples from urban settings, dual-income families, adult children of divorced parents, and victims of partner abuse. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the studies was predominantly Caucasian/White ($n = 9581$; 46.66%), with a smaller number of African American/Black ($n = 1684$; 8.20%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 1119$; 5.45%), Hispanic ($n = 1232$; 6.00%), other ($n = 4990$; 24.30%), multiracial ($n = 324$; 1.58%), and unknown/not specified by the participant/not reported by study ($n = 1603$; 7.80%). It should be noted that a large percentage of individuals who reported their race/ethnicity to be “Other” ($n = 4990$, 24.30%) consisted of one particular study; however, this designation comprised individuals from racial/ethnic backgrounds other than African American/Black. With respect to gender, the studies had a relatively equal representation of women ($n = 10648$, 51.86%) and men ($n = 9833$; 47.89%), with a small number of participants who did not report gender ($n = 52$; 0.25%). The majority of the studies ($n = 16$) reported using predominantly heterosexual or exclusively heterosexual samples; the remaining studies ($n = 5$) did not report sexual orientation of their participants.

Design. The majority of studies included in the literature review used cross-sectional designs ($n = 18$); there were a small number of studies that utilized longitudinal designs ($n = 3$). Most of the research designs were correlational in nature ($n = 17$); however, several designs were experimental ($n = 2$) and mixed (i.e., correlational and experimental; $n = 2$).

Measuring self-enhancement. All studies included in this literature review used self-report measures to assess self-enhancement. The majority of studies ($n = 16$) used an ‘over-claiming/self-serving bias’ technique to identify self-enhancement. This measurement strategy involved asking participants to assign various positive and negative traits to themselves, as well as to their romantic partner or another ‘average person.’ Self-enhancement was assessed by the degree to which participants assigned more positive (and less negative) traits to themselves, as well as more negative (and less positive) traits to their romantic partner or ‘average’ person. These measures were mostly Likert-type ratings scales.

For example, in one study (Morry et al., 2010), participants used the Interpersonal Qualities Scale (IQS) to rate themselves and their partners on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all accurate* to 9 = *extremely accurate*). The scale was a trait-based measure composed of 27 ambiguous traits, 15 positively valenced traits, and 12 negatively valenced traits. The scale was intended for rating of self; however, it was revised so that individuals could complete two versions (self and other). For example, the item “I am open” (self-version) was revised to “My dating partner is open” (partner-version). They determined self- versus partner-enhancement by creating difference scores (self minus partner) and mean difference scores for positive and negative traits separately. For positive traits, a positive difference score indicated self-enhancement (i.e., they rated themselves higher on positive traits than their partner), whereas a negative score indicated partner-enhancement. In contrast, for the negative traits, a negative

score indicated self-enhancement (i.e., they rated themselves lower on negative traits than their partner), whereas a positive score indicated partner-enhancement.

In addition to measuring self-enhancement via this method, other studies (n = 5) implemented various other approaches. Three of those studies (Katz et al., 1996; Katz et al., 1997; Katz, 2000) used self-esteem as a means of assessing self-enhancement. In each instance there was variability as to how they used self-esteem to measure self-enhancement. In one study, they used the Spouse Specific Support Scale (SSSS), which measured perceived self-esteem support and perception of intimacy/confiding for each partner. Self-esteem support scores that fell above the median were defined as being more self-enhancing, whereas those below the median were classified as less self-enhancing. In another study, standardized scores for psychological abuse were subtracted from a person's self-esteem score. A computed difference score between self-esteem and psychological abuse was used to indicate level of self-enhancement. Higher positive difference scores indicated that self-esteem was higher than the amount of psychological abuse received, whereas more negative difference scores indicated that self-esteem was lower than the amount of psychological abuse received. Lastly, they also examined both self-verification and self-enhancement at a global level by computing correspondence between women's report of their self-esteem and their perceived level of self-esteem support from their partners. At a specific level, they computed the correspondence between women's self-appraisals and their perceived partner appraisals of them with regard to 5 self-attributes. Women who perceived evaluations from their partners that were relatively congruent with their own self-evaluations were presumed to experience self-verification. In contrast, women who perceived more positive evaluations from their partners than their own self-evaluations were presumed to experience self-enhancement.

Finally, self-enhancement was assessed by examining how different groups inflated or minimized scores compared to others. In one instance, Kroska (2009) interpreted differences in gender ideology-work discrepancies in men and women. When individuals display gender ideological-work discrepancies (i.e., the conflict between their work patterns and their attitudes about what is appropriate work for men and women), men respond in self-enhancing patterns on measures of distress and self-meaning. In other words, they account for this incongruence by enhancing aspects of self-meaning while diminishing the distress relative to men who do not exhibit conflict between their work patterns and their attitudes about work for men and women. Similarly, Yamaguchi & Wang (2002) interpreted differences in how husbands and wives adjust class identifications when their own and spousal attributes differ. For married individuals in which the wife was the primary earner, their scores were weighted in a pattern that self-enhanced class attributes that were different than families in which husbands were the primary income earner.

Empirical Findings on Self-Enhancement in Couples

The results for the empirical findings on self-enhancement in the context of couples are organized across several different domains (see Table 1). The domains include (a) the extent to which self-enhancement was displayed in couple relationships, (b) self-enhancement and relationship outcomes, (c) self-enhancement and mental health outcomes, (d) self-enhancement and self-esteem, (e) self-enhancement and narcissism, (f) gender differences in self-enhancement, (g) cultural differences in self-enhancement, and (h) parental divorce and self-enhancement.

Presence of self-enhancement in couples. First, regarding whether partners self-enhanced in their couple relationships, the conclusion was an emphatic yes. Every independent sample ($n =$

21) within the literature review displayed self-enhancement in romantic relationships. One article did not report evidence of self-enhancement in couples (Burke & Harrod, 2005); however, a follow-up study on the same dataset found evidence of self-enhancement in wives, but not husbands (Kast, 2012). These findings suggest that at least some level of self-enhancement is ubiquitous in the context of romantic relationships.

Self-enhancement and relationship outcomes. Second, 14 studies examined the association between self-enhancement and a relationship outcome. Examples of relationship outcomes studied included relationship/marital satisfaction/quality ($n = 9$), relationship/marital stability ($n = 3$), relationship commitment ($n = 2$), relationship intimacy ($n = 2$) negative communication ($n = 1$), expectation for change ($n = 1$), nonverbal communication ($n = 1$), romantic attachment ($n = 1$), romantic trust ($n = 1$), relationship relevant traits ($n = 1$), perceived partner love ($n = 1$), and love for partner ($n = 1$).

Overall, there were mixed findings as to whether self-enhancement was related to positive or negative relationship outcomes. In some studies, self-enhancement appeared to reinforce positive attitudes toward the self, one's partner, and one's relationship ($n = 8$). For example, one study found that partners who self-enhanced displayed high couple entitativity (i.e., perception of unity), and exhibited greater nonverbal pleasantness, involvement, expressiveness, and relaxedness with their partners (Cropley, 2004).

However, in other studies, self-enhancement was found to be detrimental to relationship outcomes, or occur at the expense of one's partner ($n = 4$). For instance, Busby (2009) found that couples in which both partners self-enhanced experienced poorer relationship outcomes (i.e., relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, negative communication, and expectations for

change). In contrast, for couples in which both partners viewed their partner more favorably than themselves, they experienced more positive outcomes.

There were also studies in which self-enhancement was found to have mixed outcomes in relation to relationship outcomes ($n = 2$). For example, Smith (2013) found that the effect of self-enhancement on relationship outcomes differed based on level of relationship commitment and relationship quality. First, individuals self-enhanced at the expense of their partner (i.e., rated themselves more favorably compared to their partner), but only when relationship commitment was low. Second, when the relationship quality was high, individuals did not self-enhance at their partner's expense. Thus, in this study, the circumstances of one's relationship (i.e., relationship commitment and relationship quality) influence whether self-enhancement negatively affected the romantic relationship.

Self-enhancement and mental health. Third, two studies examined the effect of self-enhancement on mental health. In one study (Gordon, 2013), the authors examined the bi-directional influences of positive illusions (i.e., self-enhancement) on mental health symptoms in their partners, particularly among those with social anxiety. It was found that socially anxious individuals who received positive illusions from their partners were more uncomfortable when presenting in front of others and when interacting with acquaintances. These results suggest that being the recipient of positive illusions can have detrimental effects for individuals with social anxiety. A second study explored the effect of self-enhancement on depressive symptoms for individuals who had gone through a stressful experience (O'Mara, 2011). They found that the level of stress moderated the association between self-enhancement and depression. Specifically, self-enhancement predicted fewer depressive symptoms over four years for individuals following

a mild stressful experience, but for individuals who experienced a severe stressful experience, self-enhancement was related to more depressive symptoms for that same period of time.

Self-enhancement and self-esteem. Fourth, two studies assessed the relationship between self-enhancement and self-esteem. In one study (Campbell, 2000), individuals who had high self-esteem were more likely to view themselves positively on positive attributes and less negatively on negative attributes (i.e., self-enhancement). They also viewed their partners less negatively on negative traits. However, when comparing themselves to their partner, they did not describe themselves more positively or their partner more negatively (i.e., self-enhancement disappeared). A second study found that wives' self-enhancement predicted both their own and their husbands self-esteem (Kast, 2012). Specifically, the more positive attributions a wife made about herself were associated with higher individual self-esteem and higher self-esteem in her husband.

Self-esteem also influenced the way in which self-enhancement was expressed (Schultz, 1997). Specifically, the focus of the self-enhancement was different across individuals with high and low self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem emphasized their superior abilities compared to their partners, whereas individuals with low self-esteem focused on their social qualities such as altruism, as well as their high self-worth due to associating with a partner whom they described more positively than themselves.

Self-enhancement and narcissism. Fifth, two studies examined the relationship between self-enhancement and narcissism. In one study (Campbell, 2000), individuals high in narcissism were found to demonstrate higher levels of self-enhancement behavior by viewing themselves more positively on positive attributes and less negatively on negative attributes. Evidence also suggested that narcissists do not partner-enhance (i.e., view their partners more positively or less negatively). When individuals high in narcissism compared themselves to their partner,

narcissists viewed themselves more positively on positive traits. A more recent examination revealed that individuals high in narcissism self-enhanced at the expense of their romantic partners, but this effect was driven by lower relationship commitment and poor recent relationship quality (Smith, 2013). Specifically, individuals with high levels of narcissism self-enhanced at the expense of their partner when relationship commitment was low, but this effect disappeared when relationship commitment was high. Similarly, following feedback about a poor test outcome, individuals with low relationship quality and high narcissism were asked to recall a time when they felt accepted by their partner. Following this recall task, participants self-enhanced by reporting lower partner regard. In contrast, when the test feedback was positive, high narcissists indicated higher levels of partner regard.

Gender differences in self-enhancement. Sixth, two studies explored gender differences in self-enhancement. The first study examined self-enhancement in relation to differences in gender-ideology work discrepancies (i.e., the conflict between their work patterns and their attitudes about what is appropriate work for men and women), for both men and women (Kroska, 2009). It was found that men and women differed in how they relate to distress and self-meaning when they have gender ideology-work discrepancies. Specifically, relative to men who did not have gender-ideology work discrepancies, those that indicated discrepancies reported lower scores of distress and reported higher scores to feelings of goodness, power, and activity in several roles. This response pattern is consistent with self-enhancement theory. However, women did not respond to these discrepancies in a similar fashion, instead their response was consistent with self-verification theory. For these women, as their gender-ideology work discrepancies increased, their scores of feelings of potency and activity decreased relative to women who did not display these discrepancies. A second study found that men and women both engaged in self-

enhancement when wives earned more than their husbands (Yamaguchi, 2002). Self-enhancement was determined by examining how participants adjusted the weight of importance they place on certain factors (income, education, prestige) in determining their class identification. Men who earned a lower income than their wives decreased the weight of importance on income for both own and spousal income in deriving their class. On the other hand, women who earned more than their husbands shifted the weight of importance from education and occupational prestige to income in identifying their class.

Cultural differences in self-enhancement. Seventh, one study examined the extent to which self-enhancement in couples differs across culture (Endo, 2000). Specifically, in an analysis of self-enhancement of romantic relationship across cultures (i.e., European Canadian vs. Asian Canadian vs. Japanese), it was found that participants from all three cultures significantly self-enhanced. However, the pattern of self-enhancement differed across cultures. It was found that European Canadians self-enhanced by engaging in self-serving behaviors, whereas Japanese participants self-enhanced through relationship-serving behaviors. Traditionally, Japanese have been less enhancing compared to Western cultures (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), but these data reveals that Japanese individuals may self-enhance, but they may do so in a different manner.

Parental divorce and self-enhancement. Eighth, one study explored the effect of parental divorce on self-enhancement in couples (Hartson, 1996). Results suggested that adult children of divorce engage in larger self-enhancement biases regarding their own relationships compared to individuals whose parents are still married. Specifically, individuals who had divorced parents endorsed more committed behaviors and fewer non-committed behaviors for their relationship compared to other people (i.e., self-enhancement).

Discussion

The study of self-enhancement in romantic relationships is a developing field of research. The purpose of this literature review was to organize and describe the outcomes of studies conducted on self-enhancement in couples, note possible explanations for these findings, inform future research that might advance research on self-enhancement in couples, and discuss implications of this research for counseling. Self-enhancement is a phenomenon in which individuals evaluate themselves more positively than average. This tendency to self-enhance can have either a positive or negative effect on one's romantic relationship. Thus, it is necessary to better understand how self-enhancement affects romantic relationships, so that couples can continue to thrive and maintain the positive benefits they are receiving from their relationship.

The first main finding was that self-enhancement appears to be a common occurrence in romantic relationships. Specifically, all of the studies in the present review demonstrated self-enhancement processes in couples. This finding could be a function of my literature search—I specifically searched for studies that examined self-enhancement. Still, the fact that all studies reported self-enhancement in couples provides evidence supporting the idea that self-enhancement is a common occurrence in the context of one's romantic relationship.

The most common area of research explored links between self-enhancement in couples and relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, relationship commitment). Overall, the findings were mixed regarding the effect of self-enhancement on relationship outcomes. It appears that at times, self-enhancement may 'spread' and lead the individual to feel better about one's relationship partner and the relationship as a whole (Fowers, 1996). However, in other situations, self-enhancement appears to occur at the expense of one's partner and relationship (Busby, 2009; Smith, 2013). It may be that there are moderator variables

that influence whether self-enhancement leads to positive or negative outcomes in couples. One of the more interesting studies explored relationship commitment as a potential moderator (Smith, 2013). This study found that self-enhancement was negatively related to relationship outcomes, but only when relationship commitment was low. Other moderators, such as the level of conflict in one's relationship, or mental health variables such as narcissism, may moderate the relationship between self-enhancement and relationship outcomes.

Other studies explored the associations between self-enhancement and other variables that may be pertinent to one's romantic relationship, such as mental health, self-esteem, and narcissism. Regarding mental health, it appears that self-enhancement again has mixed effects. For example, in some instances self-enhancement was shown to be protective against developing depression symptoms in response to stress, while in other instances it was related to the development more depressive symptoms (O'Mara, 2011). It may be that the ego maintenance related to self-enhancement is effective or ineffective depending on the features of the mental illness. For self-esteem, the results suggest that self-esteem is related to greater likelihood of displaying self-enhancement (Campbell, 2000). The research also indicates that self-enhancement may present itself differently depending on self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem self-enhance by emphasizing their superior abilities compared to their partners, whereas individuals with low self-esteem emphasized their social qualities and their high self-worth due to associating with a partner, whom they described more positively than themselves (Schultz, 1997). Thus, considering that self-enhancement is so closely tied with self-esteem, it is worth considering the how individuals with low self-esteem might self-enhance. Regarding narcissism, the research findings indicate individuals high in narcissism are more likely to engage in self-enhancement, even at the expense of their partner under certain conditions (Smith, 2013);

however, the research also suggest that narcissists are unwilling to use self-enhancement as a means of enhancing their relationship or their partner (Campbell, 2000). The self-enhancement that is found in individuals high in narcissism might be especially harmful for one's relationship because it may be especially self-focused and not aid in developing more positive attitudes toward one's partner or relationship.

Finally, some studies explored demographic variables that may influence self-enhancement in couples, such as gender differences, cultural differences, and parental divorce. In each instance, self-enhancement presented itself differently across groups (e.g., men vs. women, Japanese vs. Canadians, children of divorce vs. children of still married parents). These findings indicate that when studying self-enhancement in couples, it is important to consider the socio-cultural context in which individuals and couples find themselves in. Although there has been relatively little research conducted on these topics, the research that has been done shows several differences in how self-enhancement is experienced and expressed depending on one's socio-cultural context, particularly in regard to how one views the self and the qualities that are important to the self.

Limitations

The results of the present review should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the participants in the reviewed studies were relatively homogenous. The majority of participants were undergraduates who identified as Heterosexual Caucasians. There were some married couples that were examined; however, most of these couples were young adults (i.e., early 20s). There were relatively few participants who identified as racial/ethnic minorities or gay/lesbian. Thus, the findings from the present review may not be representative for older couples, couples who identify as a racial/ethnic minority, and gay/lesbian couples.

Second, the studies in the present review focused mainly on individual accounts of self-enhancement processes. Even though these research studies examined self-enhancement in the context of couples, little research was done to elucidate how self-enhancement is observed dyadically (i.e., how the self-enhancement of one partner influences the other partner). Data in which both partners self-enhancement styles were computed to determine how both partners' self-enhancement influenced their relationship was rare.

Third, the majority of studies included in the present review were cross-sectional in nature. Thus, there is little longitudinal or experimental research to support the conclusions drawn about self-enhancement in couples. It is unclear whether self-enhancement processes change over time. It may be that self-enhancement becomes more or less prominent over time, and it would be interesting to explore how these dynamics might strengthen or weaken a romantic relationship longitudinally.

Fourth, there were limitations in the measurement of self-enhancement. Most of the studies in the present review used self-report measures of self-enhancement. This form of assessment is convenient; however, self-report data can be affected by social desirability, response bias (e.g., yea-saying), and memory bias. Relatively few studies in the present review supplemented self-report data with observational or behavioral measures of self-enhancement. Given the complexity of self-enhancement, it is recommended that some form of objective data (e.g., observational, behavioral) be included in the measurement of self-enhancement to supplement the information gathered via self-report. Also, self-enhancement was typically measured at a general trait level, rather than assessed in a particular situation. It may be that self-enhancement can be influenced by the specific context in which it occurs. Therefore, both global and specific measures of self-enhancement are needed. Finally, the self-enhancement measures

that were employed in the reviewed studies varied greatly. Although most studies used validated measures of self-enhancement, the variability of measures used made it difficult to compare findings across studies. In several instances, studies utilized different techniques for determining self-enhancement. For instance, some studies summed scores across several measures, others used a score from one measure, and others still computed difference scores across measures or participants to detect self-enhancement.

Areas for Future Research

Research on self-enhancement in the context of couples is growing, and there are several exciting areas of future research to be explored. In general, more research should be conducted that (a) uses more stringent methodology such as longitudinal or experimental designs, (b) gathers data on more representative samples of couples, (c) works to resolve measurement issues, and (c) examines additional variables that influence self-enhancement in couples.

Specifically, there is a need for:

1. Studies that gather a more demographically diverse sample of couples that is representative of the population.
2. More studies that longitudinally assess the self-enhancement process in couples.
3. Studies that experimentally manipulate self-enhancement and assess its effects on relationship outcomes.
4. Studies that measure self-enhancement both individually and dyadically, and explore how the self-enhancement of both partners affect relationship outcomes.
5. Studies that examine self-enhancement both in general and specific to a particular context (e.g., conflict situations), with measures that are valid and reliable.

6. Studies that utilize measures other than self-report, such as observational or behavioral measures.
7. More studies that explore moderator variables that may influence the effect of self-enhancement on relationship outcomes.

Implications for Counseling

Self-enhancement appears to be a common process that affects couples, both on an individual and relational level. Since self-enhancement can lead to both positive and negative relationship outcomes, it is important for a therapist to properly assess how self-enhancement is influencing the romantic relationship. Self-enhancement may be an unconscious process, and couples may not be aware that they are engaging in self-enhancement behavior. By providing psychoeducation about self-enhancement and making it a more conscious process, the therapist and couple can better recognize when self-enhancement may be having deleterious effects on the relationship. The therapist and couple could also work toward making self-enhancement a process that enhances both partners and the relationship itself.

Given the findings that both relationship commitment and relationship quality might moderate the effect of self-enhancement on relationship outcomes, a therapist could work with the couple toward enhancing these areas so that the couple can see the more positive benefits of self-enhancement. Also, since individuals with high self-esteem are more apt to self-enhance, it will be important to assess for self-esteem and work toward developing higher levels of individual self-esteem. Self-enhancement is likely more beneficial for a couple where both individuals have high self-esteem compared to other instances (e.g., both low self-esteem). Additionally, the decision by the therapist to promote or discourage self-enhancement may be dependent on whether one or both of the partners is determined to be high on narcissism. Based

on the literature, self-enhancement may be detrimental to a relationship and the opposing romantic partner when an individual has high levels of narcissism, but under certain conditions the individual's narcissism may not affect the romantic relationship or partner (e.g., high relationship quality). It is also important for the therapist to remember that self-enhancement presents itself differently depending on the clients' history and demographics. Both the assessment and treatment of these couples will vary according to their gender, culture, and parent's marriage history.

Conclusion

The current literature review showed that self-enhancement is a pervasive, influential component to romantic relationship functioning. Overall, self-enhancement had mixed effects on romantic relationship outcomes. These results are relevant to clinical work with couples. A greater understanding of whether one or both partners are self-enhancing, how it is presented, and to what extent it impacts the relationship are important to treatment outcomes. This field of research is still developing and future research is needed to clarify how self-enhancement affects relationship outcomes and to also look at whether there are other constructs that affect the strength or direction of self-enhancement in romantic relationships.

CHAPTER 3

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Self-enhancement is a process in which individuals improperly evaluate themselves. Specifically, self-enhancement entails two processes: (1) individuals hold inaccurate views of themselves and (2) typically these biases are advantageous to the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988). There are advantages and disadvantages to this phenomenon. Advantages of self-enhancement include higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008), whereas drawbacks can include being perceived by others as self-absorbed or lacking empathy (Paulhus, 1998). While there is an abundance of research on self-enhancement in individuals, much less research has been conducted on how self-enhancement affects couples. From a theoretical perspective, self-enhancement can lead to both positive and negative relationship outcomes.

The findings from the literature review (see Chapter 2) supported prior theory and research regarding self-enhancement in romantic relationships. All of the studies in the literature review found evidence of self-enhancement in romantic relationships. Research also found mixed findings for the relationship between self-enhancement and relationship outcomes. Both positive and negative outcomes were linked to self-enhancement. Additionally, the data showed that self-enhancement was associated with variables besides relationship outcomes. In particular, self-enhancement was associated with partner mental health, self-esteem, and narcissism. Demographic variables like gender, culture, and parent's marital status were found to influence the presentation of self-enhancement in romantic partners. The review suggested that further research should be conducted with more diverse couples, longitudinal analyses, experimental designs, dyadic measurement of self-enhancement, self-enhancement in relation to specific and

general conflict, alternative methods of self-enhancement measurement, and the exploration of possible moderators.

The present study seeks to address some of the specified areas of future research within the literature review. In particular, it aims to clarify the effect that self-enhancement has on dyadic adjustment. It also will look at how self-enhancement is related to conflict. Additionally, the current study will evaluate how self-enhancement is related to attribution of blame for conflict. Lastly, this study will explore whether forgiveness and relationship commitment serve as moderators of the association between self-enhancement and relationship outcomes.

Self-Enhancement in Couples

Romantic relationships have a myriad of benefits (e.g., increased individual well-being; Proulx et al., 2007), but can also be the source of frustration and pain, especially when romantic relationship dissolution occurs. For instance, romantic relationship dissolution is associated with higher rates of mortality, physical and mental illness, health-damaging behaviors, and recovery from illness (Coleman & Glenn, 2009). One relationship factor that can lead to dissolution is high levels of conflict. At some point in a romantic relationship, individuals will hurt or offend one another (Rusbult et al., 2005). Conflict is a normal part of romantic relationships; however, when severe, conflict can lead to negative feelings that can potentially disrupt a relationship (Fincham, 2000). Couples that resolve conflict mutually report higher levels of relationship satisfaction compared to couples who do not (Christensen & Shenk 1991; Gottman, 1993; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Also, couples who address conflict with constructive conflict management styles (e.g., cooperation), avoid destructive conflict management styles (e.g., withdrawal), and mutually resolve conflicts in an equitable way, have higher relationship satisfaction (Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Therefore,

understanding the conditions and/or processes by which conflict is effectively managed and resolved is important. Self-enhancement may be one factor that influences how conflict is resolved. Given that self-enhancement is a process in which individuals improperly evaluate themselves and sometimes others, it is possible that conflict may arise when individuals improperly evaluate their romantic partner, or improperly evaluate themselves compared to their partner.

The manner in which couples attribute blame is an important aspect of effective conflict resolution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Attributions refer to the cognitive meaning that individuals make for an event (Manusov, 2006). For this study, I focus on interpersonal attributions (Jaspars, Fincham, & Hewstone, 1983), in which another person's motives or actions are evaluated. More specifically, I focus on the causal attributions (i.e., explanations a partner makes for who or what was the source of an event) and responsibility attributions (i.e., explanations a partner makes for the accountability or answerability for an event) associated with close relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Research indicates that individuals who make negative attributions about their partners' intentions and responsibility for negative behavior engaged in less supportive and more negative behavior, and more negative reciprocation of their partners' negative acts during problem-solving discussions with their partners (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Miller & Bradbury, 1995). Self-enhancement is a process by which individuals make incorrect positive evaluations about themselves. It may be that individuals who have high levels of self-enhancement are more likely to attribute high levels of causal and responsibility to one's partner during conflict, and less likely to take responsibility for their part in a conflict.

Additionally, building on prior research, self-enhancement may influence relationship outcomes when examined dyadically. Previous research indicates that self-enhancement has mixed outcomes on relationship variables (see Chapter 2); however, many of those research studies only evaluate self-enhancement in one partner. Relationships are bidirectional, which means that each partner influences the outcomes for one another (Laursen, 1997). The bidirectionality of self-enhancement has been evidenced to have effects on partner's social anxiety (Gordon et al., 2013). Also, Busby et al. (2009) found that higher levels of self-enhancement in both partners (compared with partner-enhancement) were associated with more negative relationship outcomes (i.e., lower relationship satisfaction, lower stability, higher levels of negative communication, and more expectations for change). Building on these results, self-enhancement in both partners may be related to more negative relationship outcomes regarding overall relationship satisfaction, conflict, and attribution of responsibility for a conflict. Self-enhancement may be a process that negatively affects one's partner, which can become cyclically deleterious the more each of these partners engages in this pattern of behaving.

Moderators of Self-Enhancement and Relationship Outcomes

Self-enhancement results in different outcomes depending on characteristics like gender and culture, among other variables (see Chapter 2). In the present study, I examine two possible moderators of the relationship between self-enhancement and relationship satisfaction: forgiveness and relationship commitment. One characteristic that may play an important role in the self-enhancement-relationship satisfaction association is forgiveness. For the purpose of the current study, I will focus on interpersonal forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness directly occurring between two individuals). Additionally, I define forgiveness as a prosocial change in one's thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors (McCullough et al., 2000). After an interpersonal

transgression, forgiveness can be a pathway by which relational harmony and trust are restored (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Forgiveness has also been shown to occur more often in committed closed relationship compared to other relationships (McCullough et al., 1998). While there has been no research exploring the link between forgiveness and self-enhancement, there is evidence to suggest that forgiveness is an important factor in marital satisfaction (Fenell, 1993; Gordon & Baucom, 1998). While self-enhancement has been shown to demonstrate mixed outcomes for relationship outcomes, there are specific instances in which self-enhancement has deleterious effects on relationship variables. It is theorized that at times self-enhancement processes influence romantic partners to enhance their self-esteem at the cost of negatively evaluating their partner (i.e., favorably comparing themselves) for a particular event. In these instances, forgiveness may serve to buffer the negative evaluation, thereby maintaining relationship satisfaction levels. When self-enhancers are not forgiving, the negative comparison may lead to decreased relationship satisfaction.

A second variable that may moderate the self-enhancement and relationship satisfaction association is relationship commitment. Most researchers theorize relationship commitment to be formed from interdependence theory, indicating that over time interdependence is formed via pro-relationship behaviors, for example, dedication (i.e., long-term view of the relationship, willingness to sacrifice) and their perceived loss if the relationship were to end (i.e., constraints) (Rusbult & VanLange, 2003). Self-enhancement has been shown to have mixed findings in relation to relationship commitment (see Chapter 2); however, specific findings suggest that relationship commitment moderates that strength and direction of self-enhancement (Smith, 2013). Specifically, individuals with high levels of narcissism self-enhanced at the expense of their partner when relationship commitment was low, but this effect disappeared when

relationship commitment was high. It is likely that commitment serves as an indicator of relationship well-being. When commitment is high, self-enhancers may enhance aspects of their relationship and/or partner (e.g., satisfaction, partner's traits). When commitment is low, self-enhancement may be more easily accomplished at the expense of their relationship and/or partner (i.e., evaluating oneself better than).

Purpose of the Current Study

The goal of the present study is to further examine self-enhancement in romantic relationships. The present study has four primary aims. First, it will explore the effect of self-enhancement processes on dyadic adjustment. Second, it will evaluate whether self-enhancement is related to higher levels of conflict. Third, it will look at the association between self-enhancement and attribution of blame to one's partner for general conflict. Fourth, it will evaluate whether forgiveness and commitment serve as moderators in the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment.

Specifically, I pose the following hypotheses. First, participant self-enhancement will predict higher scores on relationship conflict for both the participant and their partner. Second, participant self-enhancement will predict lower dyadic adjustment scores for both the participant and their partner. Third, high scores on self-enhancement will predict higher levels of causal and responsibility attribution scores for a participant regarding their romantic partner and general conflict. Fourth, forgiveness will moderate the relationship between participant self-enhancement and (a) participant dyadic adjustment and (b) partner dyadic adjustment. Specifically, at low levels of forgiveness, there will be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of forgiveness, there will be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. Fifth, commitment will moderate

the relationship between participant self-enhancement and (a) participant dyadic adjustment and (b) partner dyadic adjustment. At low levels of commitment, there will be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of commitment, there will be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 250 individuals (125 couples) recruited from a community sample and undergraduates courses. One couple was removed because one of the partners was nonresponsive for half of the study; therefore, the final sample consisted of 248 participants (127 females, 117 males, 3 other, 1 missing). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ($M = 21.13$, $SD = 3.33$). The racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was similar to the most recent Census data (2010). For race, participants identified as 64.8% White/Caucasian, 9.3% African American, 5.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.4% Native American, and 20.3% multiracial/other. For ethnicity, 73.0% identified as not Hispanic/Latino and 26.6% identified as Hispanic/Latino. In regard to sexual orientation, participants identified as 84.3% heterosexual, 1.2% gay, 2.4% lesbian, 10.9% bisexual, and 1.2% other/missing. All couples reported being currently involved in a romantic relationship with one another and were not married to one another. The mean relationship length reported was 1.85 years ($SD = 1.45$ years). Additional demographic information can be found in Table 2.

Design

This study used a cross-sectional, correlational design.

Measures

Demographic and Relationship History Questionnaires

An 18-item questionnaire was used to collect demographic information from participants. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, race, and level of education, among others, both in multiple choice and short answer format. Individuals also

completed a brief, 7-item measure regarding their relationship history (e.g., length of current relationship, number of previous romantic relationships).

Measure of Self-Enhancement

The Over-Claiming Questionnaire (OCQ-150; Paulhus & Bruce, 1990). The OCQ-150 is a self-report measure of self-enhancement. On the OCQ-150, respondents rate their familiarity with 150 items covering 10 categories: historical names and events, fine arts, language, books and poems, authors and characters, social science and law, physical sciences, life sciences, popular culture, and current consumer products. Items are answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *never heard of it* to 4 = *very familiar*. For each category, 3 of every 15 items are foils; they do not actually exist. Therefore, any degree of claimed knowledge about them constitutes over-claiming. The foils were created to appear to be plausible members of the same category as the 12 real items. Of the 150 items, a respondent could falsely claim knowledge about 30 foil items spread across over a variety of topics. For example, in the Historical Names and Events category, real items include Napoleon, Ronald Reagan, and Bay of Pigs, while foil items are El Puente, Prince Lorenzo, and Queen Shattuck. A recent paper provided evidence for the OCQ as an accurate measure of self-enhancement across 4 studies (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). The OCQ has demonstrated that the accuracy index predicts verbal IQ scores in the .40-.60 range (Paulhus & Harms, 2004). Additionally, the exaggeration index has been shown to correlate moderately (.25-.38) with trait self-enhancement measures such as narcissism and self-deceptive enhancement (Paulhus et al., 2003). Reasonable alpha values have been found for both accuracy and bias indices (.70-.94) (Paulhus, 2012).

The OCQ used a method of detecting self-enhancement consistent with Macmillan and Creelman's (1991) method for determining bias and accuracy. As outlined by Paulhus et. al.

(2003) and Paulhus and Harms (2004), there were several steps taken to measure self-enhancement in the current sample. First, I calculated the proportion of hits (number of real items that were given a higher rating than '0'). Second, I calculated the proportion of false alarms (number of foils that were given a higher rating than '0'). Then, I determined accuracy which was the proportion of hits minus false alarms. Accuracy speaks to the difference between how confident the person was on real items vs. fake items. Last, I determined self-enhancement bias by adding the proportion of hits to the proportion of false alarms. The calculation for bias indicates how much a person reports they recognize both real and fake items. The greater the score, the greater the self-enhancement. An individual who is self-enhancing is unaware that they are "over-claiming" compared to their peers. The higher one's score indicated greater levels of self-enhancement. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient was .975 (95% CI = .970 - .979).

Measures of Relationship Variables

The Revised Commitment Inventory (RCI; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Stanley & Markman, 1992). The RCI is a 25-item self-report measure for both interpersonal commitment (i.e., dedication) and constraint commitment. Dedication (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything in my life") is marked by an intrinsic desire to be with one's partner, couple identity, long-term vision of the relationship, etc. In contrast, constraint commitment (e.g., "The steps I would need to take to end this relationship would require a great deal of time and effort.") is commitment affected by psychological constraints like social pressure, lack of alternatives, financial pressures, etc. The RCI consists of a seven factors (i.e., one dedication subscale and six constraint subscales). The subscales for constraint commitment include social pressure, financial alternatives, termination, alternative

availability, concern for partner welfare, and structural investments. Individuals rate their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The internal consistency of the dedication subscale has ranged from .75 to .88 (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Owen et al., 2011; Rhodes, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). The internal consistency of the constraint commitment subscales ranged from .77 for women to .69 for men (Owen et al., 2011) and was .80 for a national sample of unmarried individuals (Rhoades et al., 2010). For the current sample, I used the total RCI score. Higher scores on the RCI reflect greater levels of commitment. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient was .836 (95% CI = .805 - .864).

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). The DAS is a frequently used instrument for measuring adjustment in relationships (Spanier, 1985). The measure consists of 32 items (e.g. "Do you confide in your mate?"), subsuming four subscales: Consensus (i.e., the degree to which the participant agrees with their partner), Satisfaction (i.e., the degree to which the participant feels satisfied with their partner), Cohesion (i.e., the degree to which the participant and their partner participate in activities together), and Affectional Expression (i.e., the degree to which the participant agrees with their partner regarding affectional expression). Participants answer items on several different Likert scales (e.g., a 6-point Likert scale where 0 = always disagree to 5 = always agree). The DAS has been shown to distinguish reliably between distressed and non-distressed samples (Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990). Several items were modified to make this measure more applicable to college dating couples. For example, the item "do you ever regret that you married?" was altered to "do you ever regret that you became involved in a relationship with your partner?" Likewise, the item "ways of dealing with parents or in-laws" was changed to "ways of dealing with parents." The internal consistency of the scale

in the original study was satisfactory ($\alpha = .96$). The data indicated that the total scale and its components have sufficiently high consistency to justify their use (Consensus = .90, Satisfaction = .94, Cohesion = .86, Affectional Expression = .96; Spanier, 1976). I used the total dyadic adjustment score to be reflective of relationship satisfaction. Due to an error in transferring the DAS to Survey Monkey, item 31 of the measure was omitted from the present analyses. Higher scores on the DAS indicated greater scores of relationship satisfaction. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient was .883 (95% CI = .861 - .903).

Measures of Relationship Conflict and Attribution

Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli, 2007; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). The RPCS is a 39-item self-report measure that examines everyday conflict in couples. It includes six subscales: Compromise (e.g., "We try to find solutions that are acceptable to both of us."), Avoidance (e.g., "My partner and I try to avoid arguments."), Interactional reactivity (e.g., "My partner and I have frequent conflicts."), Separation (e.g., "When we experience conflict, we let each other cool off before discussing it further."), Domination (e.g., "I try to take control when we argue."), and Submission (e.g., "I surrender to my partner when we disagree on an issue."). Individuals rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The measure is meant to assess routine conflict that couples experience and is specific to unmarried couples. The RPCS demonstrates convergent validity with significant correlations with measures of communication, satisfaction, respect, love, and sexual attitudes (Zacchilli et al., 2009). For the current study, I used a total RPCS score. Higher scores on the RPCS indicate higher levels of conflict. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient was .754 (95% CI = .708 - .796).

Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Fincham & Bradbury, 2013). The RAM is a 24-item self-report measure that measures the different types of attribution behavior in a spousal relationship. The measure was modified to reflect wording consistent with all forms of romantic relationship as opposed to those specific to married couples. This measure presents individuals with four negative stimulus events (i.e., brief vignettes) that typically occur in romantic relationships. The four domains consist of “Your partner criticizes something you say,” “Your partner begins to spend less time with you,” “Your partner does not pay attention to what you are saying,” and “Your partner is cool and distant.” For each domain, individuals are asked to rate their agreement on 6-item scale from 1 = disagree strongly to 6 = agree strongly. The items assess two domains: causal attributions and responsibility attributions (i.e., intent, motivation, and blame). Causal attribution measures the extent to which the cause of the offense is caused by one’s partner vs. something external, and it is assessed across 3 domains: locus, stability, and globality. Locus assesses the extent to which the cause rested in the partner, stability examines the likelihood to change, and globality measures affected other areas of the relationship. Responsibility attribution assesses the extent to which one’s partner is responsible for what happened. More specifically, responsibility attribution determines the intentionality of the act, its motivation, and the degree to which their partner was blameworthy/at fault for his or her action. This scale was used in an effort to capture a general type of response from partners as to how they make attribution in their romantic relationship. Reliability for the RAM was evidenced through both high internal consistency and test-retest correlations (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). It also displayed construct validity by demonstrating correlation with marital satisfaction, attributions for marital difficulties, and attributions for actual partner behaviors generated by spouses (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992).

To score the RAM, I calculated composite score for the 2 main scales (causal and responsibility attributions). Higher scores on each scale reflected higher levels of causal (i.e., RAM-C) and responsibility (RAM-R) attributions. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient for the RAM-C was .826 (95% CI = .793 - .857) and the RAM-R was .908 (95% CI = .890 - .924).

Measure of Forgiveness

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough et al, 1998). The TRIM is an 18-item measure of a victim's motivations toward an offender. Participants report motivations toward their romantic partner based on a specific transgression that is recalled. They indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated higher forgiveness motivations. The TRIM consists of three subscales of motivations: avoidance (e.g., I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible), revenge (e.g., I'll make him/her pay), and benevolence (e.g., Even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her). The TRIM has strong estimated internal consistency, with Chronbach's alphas ranging from .84 to .93 for the avoidance and revenge subscales (McCullough et al., 1998) and .86 to .96 for the benevolence subscale (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Estimated test-retest reliability for the avoidance and revenge subscales was adequate in a sample of people who have difficulty forgiving, with scores ranging from .64-.86 (McCullough et al., 1998). The scale shows evidence of construct validity, and was positively correlated with other measures of forgiveness, relationship satisfaction, and commitment (McCullough et al., 1998). I calculated a total forgiveness score on the TRIM by combining all three subscales. I reverse-scored the avoidance

and revenge subscales. Higher scores on the TRIM reflect higher levels of forgiveness. For the current sample, the Chronbach's alpha coefficient was .730 (95% CI = .679 - .777).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes and from the community. In order to be eligible for participation, individuals had to be currently involved in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months and both they and their romantic partner must have been willing to participate in the study conjointly. Each couple was screened via Survey Monkey to ensure eligibility. After approval, the couple was instructed to arrive at a designated location (UNT's Terrill Hall) to complete the study. Participants met with a member of the research team and were taken to a lab outfitted with private rooms that included a small table, chairs, and a live video-audio recording system. Both partners were provided with a consent form that discussed the procedures of the study and their rights as participants. After signing the consent forms, the couple was provided with a sheet of paper in which they listed the top three areas of conflict in their dating relationship. This measure was given to couples to discuss over prior to their 'conflict interaction.' It assessed the primary areas of conflict for each partner while also serving as a means of discussion so that the couple can agree on a conflict topic. To ensure fairness and to account for any confounding variables (e.g., time length), each romantic partner was given equal time to discuss their side of the conflict. Specifically, each partner was allowed 2 minutes to share their side of the conflict without interruption, then the couple was given 4 minutes to discuss the conflict freely (8 minutes total). The researcher overseeing the conflict observed from a separate room and used an intercom to tell participants when their time had allotted for each part and moved them along in the process. Following the interaction, participants were directed to separate offices where they each had a computer to fill out self-report measures online via

Survey Monkey. It was emphasized that each person take their time and that their completion not be affected by their partner's progress. They were also assured that they were being separated to ensure privacy from their partner during the response phase. After completion of the measures on Survey Monkey, participants were allowed to go freely and were compensated for their participation. Eligible undergraduates were compensated with course credit and all participants were compensated financially (i.e., \$20 gift card). To ensure consistency amongst the observing researchers, there was a script created with procedures for guiding participants through the study. Also, observing researchers practiced until they reached a level of comfort and competence running the study on their own.

Hypotheses and Planned Analyses

Hypothesis 1

Statement. Self-enhancement, as measured by the OCQ, will predict the total conflict score on the RPCS. Specifically, higher levels of participant self-enhancement will predict higher scores of conflict reported by (a) themselves and (b) their partners.

Justification. Conflict is a normal part of romantic relationships; however, when severe, conflict can lead to negative feelings that can potentially disrupt a relationship (Fincham, 2000). Couples that resolve conflict mutually report higher levels of relationship satisfaction compared to couples who do not (Christensen & Shenk 1991; Gottman, 1993; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Self-enhancement is a process in which individuals improperly evaluate themselves and sometimes others (Taylor & Brown 1988, 1994). Conflict may arise when individuals improperly evaluate their romantic partner, or improperly evaluate themselves compared to their partner.

Planned analysis. The data are grouped (individuals nested within couples). Thus, I will use a two-level multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I also will include a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' conflict scores to be correlated between partners. For this analysis, I will conduct two multilevel modeling regressions with total conflict score as the dependent variable (for both the participant and their partner) and participant self-enhancement as the independent variable.

Hypothesis 2

Statement. Self-enhancement, as measured by the OCQ, will predict dyadic adjustment using the DAS. Specifically, higher levels of participant self-enhancement will predict lower scores of dyadic adjustment reported by (a) themselves and (b) their partners.

Justification. Previous research indicates that self-enhancement has mixed outcomes on relationship variables (see Chapter 2); however, many of those research studies only evaluate self-enhancement in one partner. Relationships are bidirectional, which means that each partner influences the outcomes for one another (Laursen, 1997). Higher levels of self-enhancement in both partners (compared with partner-enhancement) were associated with more negative relationship outcomes (Busby et al., 2009). Self-enhancement may be a process that negatively affects one's partner, which can become cyclically deleterious the more each of these partners engages in this pattern of behaving.

Planned analysis. The data are grouped (individuals nested within couples). Thus, I will use a two-level multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I also will include a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. For this analysis, I will conduct two multilevel modeling

regressions with dyadic adjustment as the dependent variable (for both the participant and their partner) and individual self-enhancement as the independent variable.

Hypothesis 3

Statement. High scores on participant self-enhancement, as measured by the OCQ, will predict higher levels of causal and responsibility attribution scores on the RAM for the participant regarding their romantic partner.

Justification. The manner in which couples attribute blame is an important aspect of effective conflict resolution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Research indicates that individuals who make negative attributions about their partners' intentions and responsibility for negative behavior engaged in less supportive and more negative behavior, and more negative reciprocation of their partners' negative acts during problem-solving discussions with their partners (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Miller & Bradbury, 1995). Self-enhancement is a process by which individuals make incorrect positive evaluations about themselves (Taylor & Brown 1988, 1994). It may be that individuals who have high levels of self-enhancement are more likely to attribute high levels of causal and responsibility to one's partner during conflict, and less likely to take responsibility for their part in a conflict.

Planned analysis. The data are grouped (individuals nested within couples). Thus, I will use a two-level multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I also will include a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' attribution scores to be correlated between partners. For this analysis, I will conduct two multilevel modeling regressions with attribution (i.e., causal and responsibility) as the dependent variables and participant self-enhancement as the independent variable.

Hypothesis 4

Statement. Participant forgiveness (TRIM) will moderate the relationship between participant self-enhancement (OCQ) and dyadic adjustment (DAS) for themselves and their partner. At low levels of forgiveness, there will be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of forgiveness, there will be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment (see Figure 1).

Justification. After an interpersonal transgression, forgiveness can be a pathway by which relational harmony and trust are restored (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Forgiveness has also been shown to occur more often in committed closed relationship compared to other relationships (McCullough et al., 1998). There is evidence to suggest that forgiveness is an important factor in marital satisfaction (Fenell, 1993; Gordon & Baucom, 1998). Self-enhancement processes may influence romantic partners to enhance their self-esteem at the cost of negatively evaluating their partner (i.e., favorably comparing themselves) for a particular event. In these instances, forgiveness may serve to buffer the negative evaluation, thereby maintaining relationship satisfaction levels. When self-enhancers are not forgiving, the negative comparison may lead to decreased relationship satisfaction.

Planned analysis. The data are grouped (individuals nested within couples). Thus, I will use a two-level multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I also will include a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. This hypothesis will be tested using the steps for moderation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, I will center the continuous predictor (i.e., self-enhancement) and moderator (i.e., forgiveness) variables to reduce multicollinearity. Second, I will create a product term by multiplying the predictor and moderator variable. Third, I will

conduct a hierarchical multilevel modeling regression analysis with the predictor variable (self-enhancement) and moderator variable (forgiveness) entered into the first block, followed by the interaction term (Self-enhancement X Forgiveness) in the second block. If the interaction is significant, I will graph the interaction and conduct a simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to interpret the interaction. For this analysis, I will use two multilevel modeling regressions with participant self-enhancement as the independent variable, participant forgiveness as the moderator variable, and both participant dyadic adjustment and partner dyadic adjustment as the dependent variables (i.e., in separate analyses).

Hypothesis 5

Statement. Participant commitment (RCI) will moderate the relationship between participant self-enhancement (OCQ) and dyadic adjustment (DAS) for both themselves and their partner. At low levels of commitment, there will be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of commitment, there will be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment (see Figure 2).

Justification. Self-enhancement has been shown to have mixed findings in relation to relationship commitment (see Chapter 2). Findings also suggest that relationship commitment moderates that strength and direction of self-enhancement (Smith, 2013). It is likely that commitment serves as an indicator of relationship well-being. When commitment is high, self-enhancers may enhance aspects of their relationship and/or partner (e.g., satisfaction, partner's traits). When commitment is low, self-enhancement may be more easily accomplished at the expense of their relationship and/or partner (i.e., evaluating oneself better than).

Planned analysis. The data are grouped (individuals nested within couples). Thus, I will use a two-level multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I also will

include a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. This hypothesis will be tested using the steps for moderation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, I will center the continuous predictor (i.e., self-enhancement) and moderator (i.e., relationship commitment) variables to reduce multicollinearity. Second, I will create a product term by multiplying the predictor and moderator variable. Third, I will conduct a hierarchical multilevel modeling regression analysis with the predictor variable (self-enhancement) and moderator variable (relationship commitment) entered into the first block, followed by the interaction term (Self-enhancement X Relationship Commitment) in the second block. If the interaction is significant, I will graph the interaction and conduct a simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to interpret the interaction. For this analysis, I will use two multilevel modeling regressions with participant self-enhancement as the independent variable, participant commitment as the moderator variable, and both participant dyadic adjustment and partner dyadic adjustment as the dependent variable (i.e., in separate analyses).

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Testing for Assumptions

Before conducting the primary analyses, I checked for missing data, outliers, and normality. The data set had no missing data with the exception of a minimal amount of missing demographic data (less than 0.5%), which I did not include in the analyses. There were a small number of outliers (less than 1% per variable). Outliers were recoded to 3 standard deviations above or below the mean. I checked normality of the data by investigating skewness and kurtosis for each variable. The data did not display evidence of non-normality, so no data transformations were required. Descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables can be found in Tables 3 and 4.

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to examining the primary analyses, I analyzed the data to determine whether there were significant differences between (a) individuals who identified as heterosexual and cisgender and (b) individuals who identified as LGBTQIA+. Across all variables, there were no significant differences between individuals who identified as (a) heterosexual and cisgender and (b) those who identified as an LGBTQIA+ (see Table 6). I also explored whether there were differences between couples in which both partners identified as heterosexual and couples in which at least one partner identified as LGBTQIA+. Across all variables, there were no significant differences between these two groups of couples (see Table 7).

Next, I conducted analyses to determine whether there were differences with respect to gender. Across the majority of the variables, there were no significant differences between males and females. However, for relationship commitment there was a significantly higher level of

relationship commitment reported by males compared to females (see Table 8). Additionally, I explored whether there were differences across measures as a result of relationship length. There was a significant negative relationship between relationship length and self-enhancement ($r = -.16, p = .01$) and dyadic adjustment ($r = -.20, p = .001$), and a significant positive relationship between relationship length and relationship commitment ($r = .20, p = .001$). There was not a significant relationship between relationship length and the remaining variables.

Lastly, each set of hypotheses was analyzed to account for a potential curvilinear relationship between self-enhancement and the predicted relationship outcome. The first hypothesis was the only analysis that yielded significant results to indicate a curvilinear relationship (see Hypothesis 1 results). The remaining hypotheses did not detect a significant curvilinear relationship between self-enhancement and the proposed relationship outcome.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 was that higher levels of self-enhancement would be associated with higher levels of conflict as reported by (a) the participant and (b) their partner. This hypothesis was tested by using a multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I included a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' conflict scores to be correlated between partners. The participant's self-enhancement was used as the independent variable, and the participant's and partner's conflict scores served as separate dependent variables (2 analyses).

This hypothesis was partially supported. For the analysis with the participant's level of conflict as the dependent variable, both the main effect ($est. = -1.15, SE = .40, p = .005$) and the curvilinear effect ($est. = .43, SE = .16, p = .008$) was significant. The pattern of these findings revealed a U-shaped relationship between self-enhancement and conflict (see Figure 1).

Participants with very low and very high levels of self-enhancement reported higher levels of conflict than participants with moderate levels of self-enhancement. For the analysis with the partner's level of conflict as the dependent variable, self-enhancement was not significantly associated with partner conflict ($est. = -.05, SE = .07, p = .481$).

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 was that higher levels of participant self-enhancement would be associated with lower dyadic adjustment for (a) themselves and (b) their partner. This hypothesis was assessed by using a multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I included a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. The participant's self-enhancement was used as the independent variable, and the participant's and partner's dyadic adjustment scores served as separate dependent variables (2 analyses).

This hypothesis was not supported. Contrary to my hypothesis, the participant's self-enhancement was actually positively associated with their own dyadic adjustment ($est. = .14, SE = .07, p = .044$). The participant's level of self-enhancement was not significantly associated with their partner's dyadic adjustment ($est. = .04, SE = .07, p = .585$).

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 was that the participant's self-enhancement would be positively associated with causal and responsibility attribution scores on the RAM. This hypothesis was assessed by using a multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I included a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' attribution scores to be correlated between partners. The participant's self-enhancement was used as the independent variable, and the participant's causal and responsibility attribution scores were used as the dependent variables.

Overall, this hypothesis was not supported. The participant's level of self-enhancement was not significantly associated with their casual attributions ($est. = -.12, SE = .13, p = .355$) or responsibility attributions ($est. = -.21, SE = .16, p = .193$).

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 was that participant forgiveness would moderate the relationship between participant self-enhancement and (a) participant dyadic adjustment (b) partner dyadic adjustment. Specifically, at low levels of forgiveness, there would be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of forgiveness, there would be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. This hypothesis was assessed by using a multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I included a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. This hypothesis was tested using the steps for moderation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, I centered the continuous predictor (i.e., self-enhancement) and moderator (i.e., forgiveness) variables to reduce multicollinearity. Second, I created a product term by multiplying the predictor and moderator variable. Third, I conducted a hierarchical multilevel modeling regression analysis with the predictor variable (self-enhancement) and moderator variable (forgiveness) entered into the first block, followed by the interaction term (Self-enhancement X Forgiveness) in the second block. In the instance of a significant interaction, I would have graphed the interaction and conducted a simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to interpret the interaction. For this hypothesis I conducted multilevel modeling regressions with participant self-enhancement as the independent variable, participant forgiveness as the moderator variable, and participant dyadic adjustment and partner dyadic adjustment as the dependent variable (2 analyses).

This hypothesis was not supported. For the model predicting participant dyadic adjustment, there was a significant positive main effect for self-enhancement on dyadic adjustment ($est. = .06, SE = .03, p = .022$). There was also a significant positive main effect for forgiveness on dyadic adjustment ($est. = .11, SE = .03, p < .001$). However, the interaction of forgiveness and self-enhancement on dyadic adjustment was not significant ($est. = -.01, SE = .02, p = .559$).

For the model predicting partner dyadic adjustment, there was not a significant main effect for self-enhancement on partner dyadic adjustment ($est. = .02, SE = .03, p = .405$). Also, there was also not a significant main effect for forgiveness on partner dyadic adjustment ($est. = .03, SE = .03, p = .283$). Finally, the interaction of forgiveness and self-enhancement on partner dyadic adjustment was not significant ($est. = .03, SE = .02, p = .241$).

Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 was that participant commitment would moderate the relationship between participant self-enhancement and (a) participant dyadic adjustment and (b) partner dyadic adjustment. Specifically, at low levels of commitment, there would be a strong, negative association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. However, at high levels of commitment, there would be a nonsignificant relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. This hypothesis was assessed by using a multilevel model with individuals (Level 1) and couples (Level 2). I included a random intercept at the couple level to allow for couples' dyadic adjustment scores to be correlated between partners. This hypothesis was tested using the steps for moderation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, I centered the continuous predictor (i.e., self-enhancement) and moderator (i.e., commitment) variables to reduce multicollinearity. Second, I created a product term by multiplying the predictor and moderator

variable. Third, I conducted a hierarchical multilevel modeling regression analysis with the predictor variable (self-enhancement) and moderator variable (commitment) entered into the first block, followed by the interaction term (Self-enhancement X Commitment) in the second block. In the instance of a significant interaction, I would have graphed the interaction and conducted a simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to interpret the interaction. For this hypothesis I conducted multilevel modeling regressions with participant self-enhancement as the independent variable, participant commitment as the moderator variable, and both participant dyadic adjustment and partner dyadic adjustment as the dependent variable (2 analyses).

This hypothesis was not supported. For the model predicting participant dyadic adjustment, there was a significant positive main effect for self-enhancement on dyadic adjustment ($est. = .05, SE = .02, p = .027$). There was also a significant positive main effect for commitment on dyadic adjustment ($est. = .17, SE = .03, p < .001$). However, the interaction of commitment and self-enhancement on dyadic adjustment was not significant ($est. = -.01, SE = .02, p = .670$).

For the model predicting partner dyadic adjustment, there was not a significant main effect for self-enhancement on partner dyadic adjustment ($est. = .01, SE = .03, p = .750$). There was also not a significant main effect for commitment on partner dyadic adjustment ($est. = -.04, SE = .03, p = .153$). Additionally, the interaction of commitment and self-enhancement on partner dyadic adjustment was not significant ($est. = .03, SE = .03, p = .175$).

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between participant self-enhancement and relationship outcomes for both the participant and their partner. I tested hypotheses related to (a) self-enhancement and relationship conflict, (b) self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment, (c) self-enhancement and causal and responsibility attribution, and (d) variables that may act as moderators of the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment.

Self-Enhancement and Relationship Conflict

Overall, the findings suggest that self-enhancement at both very low and very high levels correspond to greater levels of conflict as reported by the participant. However, the partner's reported conflict has no such relationship with the participant's self-enhancement. What this may suggest is that the participant who either self-enhances too little or too much perceives there to be more conflict compared to those who have moderate levels of self-enhancement. This effect was especially pronounced for individuals with very low levels of self-enhancement. Self-enhancement is a misperception about oneself in an overly positive manner (Taylor & Brown, 1988). If an individual either (a) thinks too little of themselves or (b) thinks too much of themselves, then it is possible that they are erroneously gauging the level of conflict within their relationship. Participants who demonstrated moderate levels of self-enhancement reported lower levels of conflict. Therefore, those participants likely have a more accurate perception of themselves and their romantic relationship. These results can have far-reaching implications as an elevation in perceived conflict can potentially be disruptive for a relationship, especially when severe (Fincham, 2000).

Additionally, these findings are unique and may explain some of the mixed findings in past research regarding self-enhancement. It is possible that self-enhancement as a construct can be unfavorable at extreme levels. Having a beneficial moderate level for a construct is not a new phenomenon. For example, the Yerkes-Dodson performance law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) postulates that at low levels of arousal individuals perform poorly and as stress and/or arousal increases performance does as well. However, at high levels of arousal or stress, there is a point at which performance begins to drop because it surpasses one's ability to handle their task(s). Therefore, a moderate level of arousal is the most beneficial range for performance. It is possible that the relationship between self-enhancement and relationship outcomes might follow a similar pattern. For instance, a person who self-enhances too much may view themselves in an overly positive fashion and that level of interaction may lend itself to increased conflict. These individuals likely exacerbate relationship conflict because of an inability to relate and assuage transgressions as opposed to ignoring them or resolving them properly. For those who self-enhance too little, they may have a degrading view of themselves and others, and struggle with addressing conflicts. Like their counterparts, they too have an inadequate manner of resolving conflict; however, their issues likely lie in an avoidance or denial of conflict. Given that the curvilinear effect was more pronounced for individuals with too low self-enhancement, it could indicate that a lower view of self contributes to conflict or at the least the perception of it. It could also suggest that low levels of self-enhancement are more detrimental to the perception of relationship conflict compared to high self-enhancers.

Self-Enhancement and Dyadic Adjustment

The results for the analysis exploring the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment were in the opposite direction as hypothesized. Specifically, high levels of

participant self-enhancement were associated with high levels of participant dyadic adjustment. Again, whereas there was a significant relationship with dyadic adjustment as rated by the participant, the same relationship was not demonstrated when dyadic adjustment was rated by the partner. Thus, individuals who self-enhance may also perceive their relationship to be of higher quality, but their partner may not perceive the relationship similarly. This finding is consistent with prior research that has found self-enhancement to be associated with higher reports of well-being and lower levels of depression (Kurt & Paulhus, 2008), as well as having a positive relationship with the tendency to cooperate with others (Otter et al., 2007; Surbey, 2011) and the ability to engage in positive coping methods (Neckar, 2013).

Increased self-enhancement may be a beneficial construct for the individual because they perceive their relationship to be of higher quality. However, it is not clear that self-enhancement is a positive process for the relationship as those benefits were not transferred over to the partner. It may be that there is simply no relationship between participant self-enhancement and partner dyadic adjustment. There also may be measurement issues with these analyses, as two ratings provided by the same individual may be more likely to be correlated than ratings across individuals. Overall, these findings illustrate that self-enhancement may have positive effects for the relationship, at least at the individual level.

Self-Enhancement and Attribution

There was no significant relationship between participant self-enhancement and participant causal or responsibility attributions. Therefore, the hypothesis that greater self-enhancement would lead to higher levels of causal and responsibility attributions of the partner was not supported. The rationale for this hypothesis was that greater self-enhancement would lead to more negative outcomes. Based on the previous two results it appears that self-

enhancement can lead to either positive or negative relationship outcomes. For this sample greater self-enhancement was associated with higher levels of participant dyadic adjustment. One explanation for these null findings is that in unmarried couples, self-enhancement does not impact the manner in which the attribute blame for conflict. The function of the blame might be moderated by another variable (e.g., a honeymoon effect), so that even when attribution of blame is affected by self-enhancement there would be nonsignificant findings.

Additionally, self-enhancement is predicated on inaccurate self-judgment; however, the manner in which that is done is can vary across context. Therefore, there may be specific instances in which this inaccuracy is projected onto interpersonal relationships. Self-enhancement likely needs to be exhibited in certain manners before attributions of blame are affected within a relationship. Overall, the mechanism behind this finding is still somewhat unknown.

Moderators of the Relationship between Self-Enhancement and Dyadic Adjustment

Neither forgiveness nor commitment were found to moderate the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. Forgiveness occurs more often in committed close relationships compared to other relationships (McCullough et al., 1998) and has been shown to be an important factor in marital satisfaction (Fenell, 1993; Gordon & Baucom, 1998). It was thought that forgiveness may serve to buffer any negative evaluation that occurred as a result of self-enhancement within the romantic relationship. Relationship commitment has been shown to moderate the strength and direction of self-enhancement (Smith, 2013), but the overall findings between commitment and self-enhancement has been mixed (see Chapter 2). It was thought that commitment, serving as an indication of relationship well-being, would again buffer any

negative evaluation that occurred as a result of self-enhancement within the romantic relationship.

The assumptions that forgiveness and commitment would buffer self-enhancement was grounded on the notion that there would be a negative evaluation by high self-enhancers. That was not exhibited in this sample; instead, high self-enhancement was associated with higher levels of dyadic adjustment, at least for the participant. Thus, it may be that I did not find a significant moderation effect because there wasn't a negative effect of self-enhancement to buffer against.

Although neither forgiveness nor relationship commitment were significant moderators of the association between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment, there were positive main effects for both forgiveness and commitment on the participant's dyadic adjustment. In other words, higher levels of forgiveness and commitment were associated with higher levels of dyadic adjustment. This finding is consistent with past research that indicates both forgiveness (Fenell, 1993; Gordon & Baucom, 1998) and commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998) are important factors in relationship satisfaction.

Interestingly, participant forgiveness and commitment did not predict dyadic adjustment as rated by the partner. Again, this may reflect a measurement artifact—perhaps ratings within one person are more likely to be significant than ratings between two people. Also, forgiveness and commitment are constructs that have both intrapersonal and interpersonal components. For example, forgiveness is a process that happens within a person (e.g., via a change in one's thoughts, behaviors, and motivations; McCullough et al., 2000), but there are also aspects of the forgiveness process that are more interpersonal in nature (e.g., communication of one's forgiveness to the offender; Hook et al., 2012). Similarly, one may feel a sense of commitment

internally, but this commitment may not necessarily be communicated to the partner. In this study, I used measures of forgiveness and commitment that focused on intrapersonal processes. This may help explain the dearth of significant findings linking participant variables to partner outcomes.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the study used a cross-sectional design, rather than a longitudinal or experimental design. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there is relatively little longitudinal or experimental research to support the conclusions drawn about self-enhancement in couples. Little is known about how self-enhancement processes might change over time. It may be that self-enhancement becomes more or less prominent over time. Also, little is known about how or if self-enhancement is expressed differently across situations. It would be interesting to better understand how self-enhancement impacts a romantic relationship in a positive or negative fashion longitudinally. There are likely important differences in these experiences that are unable to be examined using a cross-sectional research design. The use of a cross-sectional research design also makes it impossible to make causal conclusions about the relationships found between variables.

Second, the measures used in the study were self-report. Self-report data is convenient and is often important because researchers are interested in the subjective experience of the individual, but it can be confounded by social desirability and response bias (e.g., yea-saying), and difficulty with remembering the past (e.g., memory bias). Since participants in the present study were still in relationships with their romantic partners, their self-reported levels of conflict, dyadic adjustment, attribution, commitment, and forgiveness may have been influenced by a desire to present their relationship in an ideal manner.

Third, although participants completed their self-report measures in a laboratory setting, there were features of the study that were not randomized and controlled for. For example, the responses of participants may have been influenced by instructing participants to discuss their conflict in a public and controlled manner. For example, participants were given equal time to discuss their side of the agreed upon topic and told that they were being monitored to ensure consistency across the study. This observation could have served to increase positive impression management and ultimately diminished the negativity of the situation and/or enhanced views of the relationship. It is possible that had participants been given their self-report measures prior to their interaction there may have been different results. Additionally, the gender and ethnicities of the researchers could have potentially influenced participants to respond in a manner inconsistent with their routine views of the relationship (e.g., male siding with female partner when female researcher was present). Participants may also have completed measures haphazardly in an effort to leave the study as the same time as their partner, which may have affected the results of this study.

Fourth, the measurement of self-enhancement within this study possibly affected the results. More explicitly stated, the OCQ measured self-enhancement at a general trait level, rather than assessing self-enhancement in a particular relationship or situation. It may be that self-enhancement can be influenced by the specific context in which it occurs. It may have impacted the results had I supplemented the self-report data with observational or behavioral measures of self-enhancement. The OCQ also assesses self-enhancement by evaluating knowledge in an over-claiming fashion. This is only one manner of measuring self-enhancement and it is entirely possible that certain groups of individuals prefer to self-enhance in manners that are more comfortable or readily available to them. For example, persons who are either have low

intelligence or have limited educational experiences may not feel comfortable claiming knowledge related to informational topics. However, they may prefer to self-enhance when they are over claiming positive attributes of themselves that are not tied to general information (e.g., their attractiveness, status, physical capabilities, and social prowess). Lastly, it may have been helpful to include a measure of self-enhancement that was theorized to occur at an interpersonal level (e.g., self-enhancing in comparison to one's partner). Much of the results were based on intrapersonal phenomena and applied to interpersonal constructs. Given that several of these outcomes were based on the couples' relationship, or at the least affected it, the study may have been better suited to use assessments that combined or compared the couple's data rather than focusing on an individual's perspective. Self-enhancement is in many respects an interpersonal phenomenon, therefore, being able to match or at the least supplement the trait-based manner of measuring self-enhancement may have given a better picture of how self-enhancement processes affect romantic relationships.

Fifth, the sample used was a convenience sample of unmarried, college students and their partners whose current romantic relationship length averaged nearly 2 years. It is possible that the restrictions for the sample in this study may limit the generalizability to all romantic relationships. Of note, there might be a different perception of a romantic partner wherein the relationship itself has a greater degree of commitment and familiarity. The honeymoon-is-over effect (Kurdek, 1999) indicates that relationship satisfaction starts out initially high and decreases over the course of a marriage. It is possible that sampling a group of self-selecting unmarried individuals may have confounded some of the effects that self-enhancement could demonstrate in married couples or unmarried couples who have been together for a longer period

of time. Self-enhancement may also be expressed differently in couples who have been dating only a short time and are less committed.

Areas for Future Research

There are several areas for future research on the topic of self-enhancement in couples. First, there is a need to explore how self-enhancement process change over time within a romantic relationship. Self-enhancement is a construct that may vary over time. If it is a construct that is more situationally dependent, it may be necessary to explore self-enhancement in a variety of situations within couples and to what extent self-enhancement influences the relationship over time. The use of a longitudinal approach that would be capable of gathering information about self-enhancement both in the relationship generally as well as in specific situations may allow for a better understanding of how self-enhancement affects couples over time.

Second, future studies may benefit from using behavioral or observational measures of self-enhancement. Utilizing behavioral or observational measures in addition to self-report measures would allay some of the concerns about the biases inherent in self-report measurement (e.g., social desirability, response bias, memory bias; Dorn, Hook, Davis, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2014). The use of behavioral or observational measures with self-report measures may also allow future researchers to determine whether there is under- or over-reporting of perceived self-enhancement versus actual self-enhancement.

Third, the use of a different methodology with greater experimental control could provide a clearer understanding of self-enhancement in couples. For example, I could have randomized the manner in which couples filled out their self-report data and interacted with each another. I could have manipulated their conflict at some level through the use of deception (e.g., leading partners

to believe that the other partner blamed them more for a particular incident) and included some level of behavioral observation to accompany the self-report data.

Fourth, while relationship type was specified for this particular study, future studies may benefit from broadening the type of romantic relationships sampled. It may benefit future researchers to compare how the self-enhancement changes across relationship context (e.g., dating relationships vs. married couples vs. separated/divorced couples), and control for relationship factors such as relationship closeness, longevity, etc. This would expand the literature by illustrating the differences and similarities between how self-enhancement operates in different romantic relationship contexts.

Fifth, further study is needed to examine possible mediators and moderators of the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. While this study found no support for the moderation analyses using forgiveness and commitment, these results were specific to couples in current unmarried romantic relationships. Referring back to the honeymoon-is-over effect, it is possible that the length of one's relationship may impact the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment, and different results may occur among couples who have been together for several years. This is further evidenced by preliminary analyses that demonstrated several measures to be significantly related to relationship length, and also considering that over half of the sample being a part of their romantic relationship for less than 2 years. Gender may also be a variable that influences the manner in which self-enhancement is expressed. In the preliminary analyses males reported significantly higher levels of relationship commitment and this effect could possibly influence the manner in which self-enhancement is manifested. Self-enhancement is clearly linked to relationship outcomes though much of those

findings are mixed (see Chapter 2). It is important to distinguish what factors contribute to self-enhancement having a positive or negative effect on dyadic adjustment.

Implications for Counseling

The findings of the present study have several implications for counseling, especially in the context of working with couples who are struggling in their relationship. The findings of this study provide information regarding how self-enhancement may affect perceptions of conflict in one's relationship, as well as dyadic adjustment.

First, it may be helpful for clients who are experiencing conflict to assess whether their perceptions of the conflict are an accurate indication of the actual amount of conflict being experienced by the couple. Several aspects of these results are likely helpful within couples therapy. For one, it would likely be important to normalize their experience of perceived conflict and help them better moderate their expectations of conflict within a romantic relationship. Next, the partner(s) who are experiencing higher levels of self-enhancement may benefit from a more accurate depiction of themselves, their partner, and the relationship. One manner of doing this could be to focus on reinforcing humility in either individual or couples therapy as it has been positively associated with relationship outcomes such as satisfaction (Farrell et al., 2015). Additionally, for couples with partners where one or both partners have low self-enhancement and therefore low views of themselves, it might benefit treatment to help these individuals focus more on positive aspects of their relationship.

Second, it may be beneficial to facilitate self-enhancement for the sake of dyadic adjustment. Given that self-enhancement can essentially be an over-incorporation of positive information regarding oneself, it may improve relationship functioning to integrate that manner of thinking to their relationship. Having a positivity bias regarding oneself and the relationship

may help foster resiliency as couples deal with stressors, both from within and outside of the relationship, that could negatively impact their relational functioning. A caveat to this recommendation is to facilitate moderate levels of self-enhancement rather than very high levels. The reason for this preface is that at high levels of self-enhancement there were also higher levels of perceived conflict. It is important to work with clients to explore when to be more optimistic and positive about the relationship and when a more accurate view is more helpful.

Third, the findings suggest that forgiveness and commitment were strongly linked to one's perception of dyadic adjustment. It may be essential to make these internal processes transparent within the relationship. Therefore, to enhance dyadic adjustment within the relationship it is likely important to facilitate a forgiveness or reconciliation process with the couple and/or emphasize the bounds of commitment between partners. Lastly, regardless of the approach used incorporating this information, a therapist would need to accurately gather both partner's perspectives and not allow one partner dominate the focus of therapy. This will be important for the therapist to obtain an accurate assessment of the couple's functioning rather than relying on one partner's report.

Conclusion

There has been mixed findings regarding self-enhancement processes within couples. The current study investigated self-enhancement processes on conflict, dyadic adjustment, and attribution of blame. It also assessed whether both forgiveness and relationship commitment moderated the relationship between self-enhancement and dyadic adjustment. Participant self-enhancement at very high and very low levels was shown to be associated with greater levels of perceived conflict by participants. There was evidence that participant self-enhancement was associated with higher perceived dyadic adjustment, although there was no association between

self-enhancement and conflict and dyadic adjustment as perceived by the partner. Further research in this area of study will better help us better understand the potential benefits or consequences, and when they occur, within romantic relationships and how that may inform interventions within couples counseling.

Table 1

Self-Enhancement in Couples

| Authors | Participants | Sample | Self-enhancement Measure | Summary of Main Findings |
|-----------------|--|--|---|---|
| Burke (2005) | 286 m, 286 f (age M & SD Not reported) | Registered couples from Washington state | Self-created item(s) | No evidence of self-enhancement in newlyweds was reported. |
| Busby (2009) | 4881 m, 4881 f (Study 1) (age $M = 28$, $SD = 8.5$) 335 m, 335 f (Study 2) (age $M = 27$) | Undergraduate couples, couples from a premarital workshop, or couples via the internet | Big Five personality constructs | Higher self-enhancement across dyads was related to negative relationship outcomes. |
| Campbell (2000) | 50 m, 50 f (age M & SD Not reported) | Undergraduate couples | RSE, 40 traits derived from the FFM, and self-created items | Both narcissists and high self-esteem (HSE) individuals self-enhanced. However, narcissists did not enhance their partner, whereas HSE individuals did. Narcissists also self-enhanced when compared to their partner, but HSE individuals did not. |
| Cropley (2004) | 45 m, 45 f (age $M = 27$) | Undergraduate couples | ASQ | Individuals who self-enhanced and had high couple entitativity displayed greater nonverbal pleasantness, involvement, expressiveness, and relaxedness. |
| Endo (2000) | 172 m, 201 f, 26 nr (Study 1) (age $M = 20.29$) 232 m, 199 f, 22 nr (Study 2) (age $M = 19.93$) | Undergraduate students Undergraduate students | Self-created item(s) | Self-enhancement present itself differently across cultures. Relationship-serving biases were more evident in Japanese participants. |
| Fowers (1996) | 55 m, 55 f (age $M = 42.8$) | Married couples | LOT | Positive marital illusions (i.e., self-enhancement) were related to greater marital satisfaction. |
| Gjerde (2004) | 39 m, 44 f (age $M = 23$) | Community sample | CAQ | Self-enhancement was negatively correlated with secure attachment and positively related to dismissing attachment. |
| Gordon (2013) | 112 m, 112 f (age $M = 21.6$, $SD = 4.4$) | Undergraduate students and their partners | SCRS | Partners of socially anxious individuals have greater positive illusory bias (i.e., self-enhancement) of their partner as their partner's social anxiety increases. |

(table continues)

(continued)

| Authors | Participants | Sample | Self-enhancement Measure | Summary of Main Findings |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Hartson (1996) | 31 m, 78 f (age $M = 19.67$) | Undergraduate students | Self-created item(s) | Adult children of divorced parents displayed larger self-enhancement biases about their own relationships, when compared to those with still married parents. |
| Kast (2012) | 286 m, 286 f (Same as Burke) (age M & SD Not reported) | Registered couples from Washington state | Self-created item(s) | Self-enhancement was found in wives, but not husbands. Wives' self-enhancement was predictive of trust in their partner. |
| Katz (1996) | 127 m, 138 f (age $M = 39.61$) | Married couples from Georgia | SSSS | Consistent with S-E theory, individuals who perceived higher levels of self-esteem support from their marriage exhibited more positive relationship outcomes. |
| Katz (1997) | 0 m, 317 f (age M & SD Not reported) | Undergraduate women | RSE, PSSS, SAQ, SAQ-PS | Self-enhancement was related to more positive relationship outcomes. |
| Katz (2000) | 0 m, 82 f (age $M = 19$, $SD = 1.15$) | Undergraduate women | RSE and PMW-E | Consistent with S-E theory, women who received greater psychological abuse relative to their self-esteem endorsed lesser relationship intimacy and stability. |
| Kroska (2009) | 120 m, 137 f (age $M = 47.90$) | Community sample | GIS and self-created item(s) | Gender-ideological work discrepancies were negatively related to distress and positively related to feelings of goodness, power, and activity in several roles, results consistent with compensatory S-E theories. |
| Morry (2010) | 73 m, 108 f, 1 nr (age $M = 19.67$, $SD = 2.97$) 28 m, 66 f (age $M = 43.14$, $SD = 9.84$) | University students Married and common-law individuals | IQS | Individuals partner- and self-enhanced in dating and married individuals; however, the self-enhancement wasn't always significant. As partners moved away from self-enhancement and toward partner-enhancement, relationship quality increased. |
| Morry (2014) | 53 m, 81 f, 2 nr (Study 1) (age $M = 20.22$, $SD = 2.84$) 58m, 58 f (Study 2) (age $M = 20.59$, $SD = 4.27$) 100 m, 183 f, 1 nr (Study 3) (age $M = 19.17$, $SD = 2.60$) | Individuals in romantic relationships | Relationship-relevant Traits for Dating Relationships | Individuals self-enhanced compared to the average student and rated themselves highly on low and moderate relationship-relevant traits, albeit lower than their dating partner. |

(table continues)

(continued)

| Authors | Participants | Sample | Self-enhancement Measure | Summary of Main Findings |
|------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|--|
| O'Mara (2011) | 82 m, 82 f (Study 1) (age $M = 24.4$) 169 m, 169 f (Study 2) (age $M = 24.5$) | Newlywed couples Newlywed couples | Self-created item(s) and BDI | Self-enhancement was predictive of fewer depressive symptoms over 4 years for those with mild stressful experiences, but was related to more depressive symptoms amongst individuals with severe stressful experiences. |
| Pomerantz (1995) | 31 m, 64 f (age M & SD Not reported) | Married individuals | Modified LRS | Self-enhancement was seen most prominently when individuals rated themselves, then their spouses, and finally for others. The tendency to diminish negative attributes was shown to be moderately related to participant's self-reported marital satisfaction and idealistic distortion. |
| Sacco (2001) | 99 m, 99 f (age $M = 41.17$) | Married couples | ASPP, BDI, QMI, SRS | Regardless of self-esteem and depression level, and across trait categories, targets were more maritally satisfied when their partners viewed them positively and less satisfied when their partners viewed them negatively. These findings were consistent with S-E theory. |
| Schutz (1997) | 0 m, 40 f (age $M = 19$) | Undergraduate women | Self-created item(s) | High self-esteem subjects emphasized their superior abilities compared to their partners (i.e., self-enhancement), while low self-esteem subjects enhanced their self-worth by associating with a partner whom they described more positively than themselves. |
| Smith (2013) | 109 m, 107 f (age $M = 20.78$, $SD = 2.78$) | Undergraduate couples | Self-created item(s) | People with high narcissism self-enhance (i.e., self-serving bias) at the expense of their romantic partners, but this effect is driven by low relationship commitment and poor recent relationship quality. |
| Yamaguchi (2002) | 2546 m, 2631 f (age M & SD Not reported) | Married, dual-income earners | Self-created item(s) | An income difference between husband and wife, and not a difference in education or occupational prestige, generates self-enhancement in class identification among some people such as men with lower income than their wives and women with higher income than their husbands. |

(table continues)

(continued)

Note. m = Male; f = Female; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation. Big Five Personality Constructs (Costa & McCrae, 1988); RSE = Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965); FFM = Five Factor Model (John, 1990); ASQ = Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, et al., 1982); LOT = Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985); CAQ = California Adult Q-Set (Block, 1961/1978); SCRS = Social Comparison Rating Scale (Allan & Gilbert, 1995); SSSS = Modified Spouse Specific Support Scale (Cohen et al., 1985); PSSS = Partner Specific Support Scale (Cohen et al., 1985); SAQ = Short-form Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989); SAQ-PS = Modified Perceived Partner Evaluation of Specific Self-Attributes (Pelham & Swann, 1989); PMW-E = Psychological Maltreatment of Women – Emotional/Verbal Abuse Scale (Katz, 2000); GIS = Gender-ideological Identity Scale (Kroska, 2000); IQS = Interpersonal Qualities Scale (Murray et al., 1996); Relationship-Relevant Traits for Dating Relationships (Gill & Swann, 1994); BDI = Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961); LRS = Anderson's Likableness Rating Scale (Anderson, 1968); ASPP = Adult Self-Perception Profile (Messer & Harter, 1986); QMI = Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983); SRS = Spouse Rating Scale (Sacco et al, 1993).

Table 2

*Demographic Statistics*Participants $N = 248$

| Variable | <i>N</i> | % | Variable | <i>N</i> | % |
|------------------------|----------|------|------------------------|----------|------|
| Gender | | | Relationship Type | | |
| Male | 117 | 47.2 | Heterosexual | 188 | 76.4 |
| Female | 127 | 51.2 | Non-heterosexual/Mixed | 58 | 23.6 |
| Other/Missing | 4 | 1.6 | Relationship Length | | |
| Ethnicity | | | 6 months to 1 year | 108 | 43.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 66 | 26.6 | 1 year to 2 years | 68 | 27.4 |
| Not Hispanic or Latino | 181 | 73.0 | 2 years to 3 years | 28 | 11.3 |
| Race | | | More than 3 years | 44 | 17.7 |
| White/Caucasian | 160 | 64.5 | Religious Affiliation | | |
| Black/AA | 23 | 9.3 | Christian | 107 | 43.1 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 13 | 5.2 | Buddhist | 3 | 1.2 |
| Native American | 1 | 0.4 | Muslim | 3 | 1.2 |
| Multiracial/Other | 50 | 20.2 | Jewish | 5 | 2.0 |
| Sexual Orientation | | | Agnostic | 62 | 25.0 |
| Heterosexual | 209 | 84.3 | Atheist | 26 | 10.5 |
| Gay | 3 | 1.2 | Other | 41 | 16.5 |
| Lesbian | 6 | 2.4 | Education | | |
| Bisexual | 27 | 10.9 | HS diploma/GED | 26 | 10.5 |
| Other/Missing | 3 | 1.2 | Some college | 154 | 62.1 |
| Marital Status | | | Associate's degree | 40 | 16.1 |
| Single | 201 | 81.0 | Bachelor's degree | 23 | 9.3 |
| Divorced | 3 | 1.2 | Master's degree | 3 | 1.2 |
| Other | 43 | 17.3 | Doctoral degree | 1 | 0.4 |

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation | Range | Possible Range |
|----------|------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|
| OCQ | 1.10 | 0.38 | 0.43 to 2.00 | 0.00 to 2.00 |
| RPCS | 2.87 | 0.45 | 1.68 to 4.23 | 1.00 to 5.00 |
| DAS | 4.25 | 0.45 | 2.77 to 5.14 | 1.00 to 6.00 |
| RAM-G-C | 3.31 | 0.79 | 1.00 to 5.58 | 1.00 to 6.00 |
| RAM-G-R | 2.36 | 0.96 | 1.00 to 5.17 | 1.00 to 6.00 |
| TRIM | 4.51 | 0.34 | 3.41 to 5.00 | 1.00 to 5.00 |
| RCI | 4.82 | 0.75 | 2.55 to 6.71 | 1.00 to 7.00 |

Note. OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; RAM-S-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Causal; RAM-S-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

Table 4

Correlations – Gender Combined

| | OCQ | RPCS | DAS | RAM-G-C | RAM-G-R | TRIM | RCI |
|---------|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|-----|
| OCQ | 1 | | | | | | |
| RPCS | -.09 | 1 | | | | | |
| DAS | .16* | -.33*** | 1 | | | | |
| RAM-G-C | -.08 | .25*** | -.47*** | 1 | | | |
| RAM-G-R | -.09 | .27** | -.37*** | .66*** | 1 | | |
| TRIM | -.05 | -.07 | .31*** | -.19** | -.26*** | 1 | |
| RCI | -.07 | .03 | .36*** | -.21*** | -.24*** | .28*** | 1 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

Table 5

Correlations – Separated by Gender

| | OCQ | RPCS | DAS | RAM-G-C | RAM-G-R | TRIM | RCI |
|---------|-------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| OCQ | 1 | -.06 | .19* | -.09 | -.08 | -.03 | -.03 |
| RPCS | <i>-.13</i> | 1 | -.31*** | .22* | .25** | -.03 | .01 |
| DAS | <i>.17</i> | <i>-.36***</i> | 1 | -.42*** | -.35*** | .33*** | .41*** |
| RAM-G-C | <i>-.10</i> | <i>.29***</i> | <i>-.51***</i> | 1 | .68*** | -.17 | -.25** |
| RAM-G-R | <i>-.12</i> | <i>.27**</i> | <i>-.41***</i> | <i>.66***</i> | 1 | -.28** | -.32*** |
| TRIM | <i>-.07</i> | <i>-.10</i> | <i>.31***</i> | <i>-.23*</i> | <i>-.24**</i> | 1 | .34*** |
| RCI | <i>-.13</i> | <i>.03</i> | <i>.32***</i> | <i>-.16</i> | <i>-.17</i> | <i>.22*</i> | 1 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. The bottom left scores in *italics* are correlations for females ($n = 127$) and the top right scores represent correlations for the males ($n = 117$). OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

Table 6

Preliminary Analyses – LGBTQIA+ Individuals vs. Non- LGBTQIA+ Individuals

| Variable | LGBTQIA+ – Mean | LGBTQIA + – Standard Deviation | Non- LGBTQIA+ – Mean | Non- LGBTQIA+ – Standard Deviation | T-Score |
|----------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| OCQ | 1.09 | 0.31 | 1.10 | 0.38 | 0.17 |
| RPCS | 2.90 | 0.47 | 2.87 | 0.45 | -0.31 |
| DAS | 4.20 | 0.41 | 4.26 | 0.45 | 0.95 |
| RAM-G-C | 3.33 | 0.80 | 3.30 | 0.80 | 1.17 |
| RAM-G-R | 2.35 | 0.86 | 2.35 | 0.98 | -0.51 |
| TRIM | 4.57 | 0.39 | 4.49 | 0.33 | 1.25 |
| RCI | 4.66 | 0.76 | 4.85 | 0.75 | 1.91 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; RAM-S-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Causal; RAM-S-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

Table 7

Preliminary Analyses – Heterosexual Couples vs. Non- Heterosexual & Mixed Couples

| Variable | Heterosexual Couples – Mean | Heterosexual Couples Standard – Deviation | Non- Heterosexual & Mixed Couples – Mean | Non- Heterosexual & Mixed Couples – Standard Deviation | T-Score |
|----------|--------------------------------|---|--|--|---------|
| OCQ | 1.10 | 0.39 | 1.10 | 0.30 | -0.21 |
| RPCS | 2.87 | 0.46 | 2.88 | 0.42 | -0.10 |
| DAS | 4.26 | 0.47 | 4.23 | 0.40 | 0.36 |
| RAM-G-C | 3.28 | 0.80 | 3.38 | 0.79 | 0.07 |
| RAM-G-R | 2.35 | 0.97 | 2.36 | 0.93 | -0.86 |
| TRIM | 4.51 | 0.33 | 4.50 | 0.37 | 0.16 |
| RCI | 4.83 | 0.74 | 4.78 | 0.80 | 0.40 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; RAM-S-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Causal; RAM-S-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

Table 8

Preliminary Analyses – Males vs. Females

| Variable | Male – Mean | Male – Standard Deviation | Females – Mean | Females – Standard Deviation | T-Score |
|----------|-------------|------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| OCQ | 1.09 | 0.35 | 1.10 | 0.37 | 0.08 |
| RPCS | 2.91 | 0.42 | 2.84 | 0.49 | -1.66 |
| DAS | 4.28 | 0.46 | 4.24 | 0.45 | -0.76 |
| RAM-G-C | 3.26 | 0.84 | 3.33 | 0.76 | 0.70 |
| RAM-G-R | 2.45 | 1.03 | 2.27 | 0.89 | -1.50 |
| TRIM | 4.50 | 0.33 | 4.50 | 0.34 | -0.09 |
| RCI | 4.91 | 0.79 | 4.73 | 0.72 | -2.13* |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. OCQ = The Over-Claiming Questionnaire; RPCS = Romantic Partner Conflict Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; RAM-G-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Causal; RAM-G-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – General – Responsibility; RAM-S-C = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Causal; RAM-S-R = Relationship Attribution Measure – Specific – Responsibility; TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory; RCI = Revised Commitment Inventory.

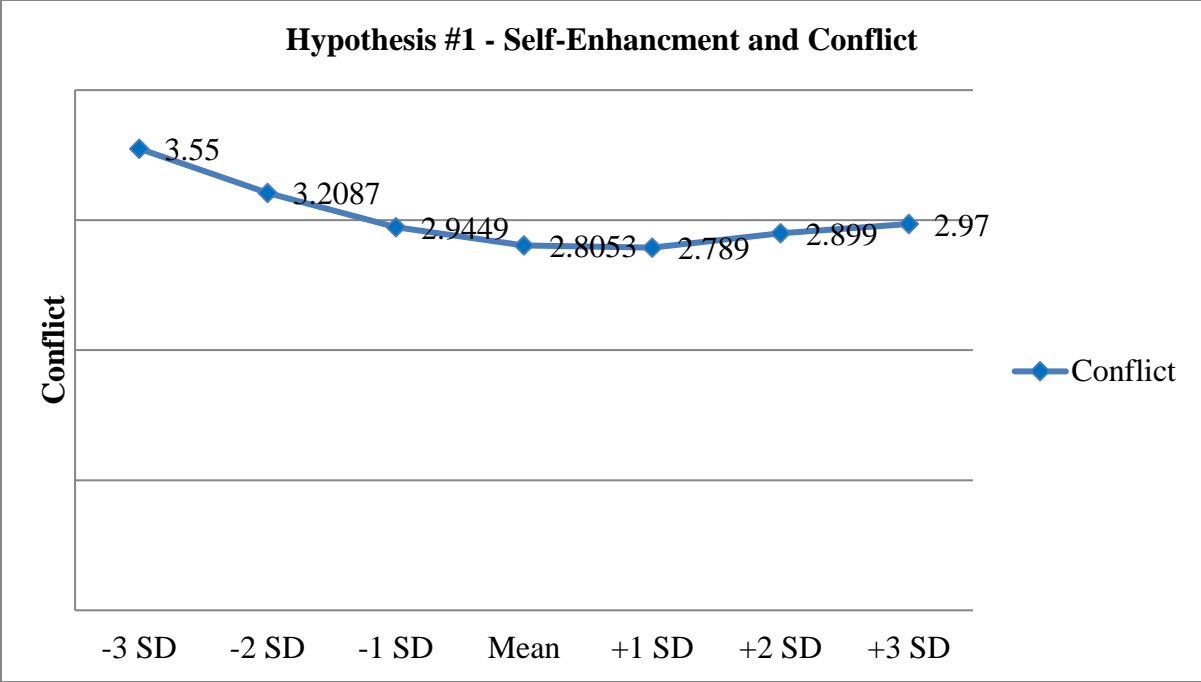


Figure 1. The curvilinear effect of self-enhancement and relationship conflict.

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