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Social comparison of romantic relationships: The influence of family, friends, and media

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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of these studies was to gain understanding of multiple facets of relationship social comparison. Study 1 (N = 304) utilized a longitudinal survey design to determine 1) the relative importance to one's own relationship of social comparisons to the relationships of family members, friends, and media portrayals of romantic relationships; and 2) the impact of comparisons to relationships of higher or lower quality on outcomes of relationship quality and stability at a follow-up three months later. No differences emerged in the impact of comparisons to family members, friends, or media portrayals on participants' evaluations of their own romantic relationships. Evidence was found for a detrimental effect of upward comparisons, with participants making upward comparisons experiencing lower relationship quality and a higher rate of break-up than those making downward comparisons. Study 2 (N = 221) used an experimental design to explore the effects of a forced upward or downward comparison to media portrayals of relationships on the outcome of perceived relationship quality. No significant differences in relationship quality were found between those assigned to view and evaluate positive versus negative media portrayals of romantic relationships, although participants who judged the media portrayal relationships more negatively did experience a bolstering effect on their own relationship satisfaction.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A good relationship is in the eye of the beholder, just like beauty. So, how does a person determine if his or her relationship is one worthy of long-term commitment? Research has consistently shown that factors such as our perceptions of relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Rusbult, 1980), social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), and communication (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002) are important to relationship quality and stability, but against what standard do we measure? Social comparison theory has shown us that when we do not have an objective way to assess our successes in a particular domain, we resort to comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Very little research has been devoted to the study of social comparison processes in relationships and virtually none has examined the specific targets with which we compare when making assessments of our own relationships or when forming expectations for the future of our relationships. One goal of the current studies was to examine the relative importance of various sources of comparative information by looking at social comparisons with family and friends as well as with portrayals of relationships in the media. Additionally, I aimed to examine the effects that these comparisons have on peoples' perceptions of their relationships and their confidence in the strength and stability of their own relationships.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory was formally developed by Leon Festinger (1954). In his original theory, Festinger posited that people have a natural tendency to evaluate their abilities and opinions. It is most preferable to have an objective, clear-cut benchmark against which to measure oneself, but in many domains of life, no such benchmark exists. In the absence of an objective target, people evaluate themselves by comparing with the abilities and opinions of others. The target others with whom we choose to compare vary by situation, but generally we strive to compare with others whom we perceive to be similar to ourselves in the domain of interest. In the area of abilities, it was theorized that we also have a tendency to compare upwards, or with others who are somewhat better than ourselves in the domain of interest, so that we have a goal towards which to strive, a guide as to how to better our own outcomes in the future. According to Festinger, the more important the domain of interest is to us or to our central social groups, the more we should have the tendency and feel pressure to reduce discrepancies between our own outcomes and those with which we compare.

Although Festinger was the first to use the term social comparison, his idea that we look to others to evaluate ourselves was not a new one. In the classic study on the autokinetic effect by Sherif (1935), for example, participants looked to others to determine what a reasonable response would be to the question of how far a dot of light (that was actually stationary) had traveled in the dark. Another classic conformity study by Asch (1952/1972) showed that when participants were asked to make judgments about line lengths following clearly wrong answers given by confederate participants, they compared their own

perceptions to the apparent perceptions of their peers, in many cases questioning their own experience and ability, and frequently giving an obviously wrong answer that was in line with what the social group had prescribed.

Although Festinger essentially abandoned social comparison theory for cognitive dissonance theory, the study of social comparison processes has continued in a number of domains. Schacter and Singer (1962), for example, demonstrated that social comparison could be applied to the understanding of emotions. In their classic study (Schacter & Singer, 1962), they found that people liked to affiliate with others in situations that aroused fear, in part to determine if the emotions that they were experiencing were normative. In other words, they were socially comparing their emotions.

The idea that different kinds of motivations may lead to different forms of social comparison was first advanced by Thornton and Arrowood (1966), who posited that under some circumstances, our goal is to self-evaluate, while under other circumstances, we are motivated to self-enhance. When we are merely seeking to evaluate our standing, consistent with classic social comparison theory, we should be driven to compare with others who are better, i.e. those who are a positive prototype in the domain of interest. However, there are also situations in which our goal is simply to feel better about ourselves, which could result in a comparison to a positive prototype (as Thornton and Arrowood, 1966 would claim) to demonstrate how close we are to the ideal, or with someone who is worse so that we can feel better because we have better outcomes than the comparison target, a theory discussed by researchers such as Hakmiller (1966) and Wills (1981) as downward social comparison theory. Downward comparisons may be particularly prevalent in situations in which we experience a threat to our self-esteem (Hakmiller, 1966) or if we have lower self-esteem in

general (Wills, 1981), and therefore seek opportunities to feel better about ourselves, i.e., to self-enhance. Downward social comparisons may also serve a coping function for people dealing with specific personal problems, such as mental illness, or other threats (Gibbons, 1986). Additional work has indicated that the influence of self-esteem and personal threat may also, at times, be associated with upward comparisons as a source of inspiration that may buffer subjective well-being (Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

The Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) Model (Tesser, 1988), in a similar vein to downward comparison theory, posits that the goal of social comparison is more to maintain a positive self-view than to gain an objective understanding about ourselves. According to the SEM Model, when we observe close others who are better in a particular domain than ourselves, we can choose to either socially compare, which could potentially be threatening, or we can bask in the reflected glow of the other's accomplishments and enjoy our close-other's good fortune. The latter will tend to be more prevalent in domains that are not central to our own self-worth.

The idea that people may at times engage in temporal comparisons (i.e., comparisons with their own outcomes over time) rather than social comparisons with others was originally advanced as an addendum to social comparison theory by Albert (1977). Albert posited that temporal comparisons should be particularly prevalent in circumstances when there is no relevant other with whom to socially compare.

One particularly interesting finding that has arisen from work with social comparison is that people tend to believe they are doing better than most and doing better than they actually are. Most people believe that they are better than average in many respects and possess fewer negative attributes than others (Taylor & Brown, 1988). The work of Taylor

and Brown (1988) revealed that prominent positive illusions include overly positive views of the self, having more control over situations than is true in reality, and unrealistic optimism about one's outcomes. It has also been indicated that these positive illusions are a part of normal, healthy human functioning, supported by the fact that people suffering from depression tend to be more realistic than are people not suffering from poor mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In other words, the self-enhancement aspect of social comparison appears to be particularly prevalent and a normal form of social cognition that aids in maintaining perceptions of well-being and high ability.

Relationships and Social Comparison

The study of social comparison in the domain of relationships is still in its infancy. A search of the psychology literature for relevant work yielded very few articles, most of which have been published in the last decade. It has been demonstrated that positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988) are often maintained in romantic relationships. People tend to believe that their relationships are superior to others' relationships (Frye & Karney, 2002), in terms of higher relationship satisfaction (Buunk & van der Eljnden, 1997), more equitable roles (Buunk & VanYperen, 1991), and a lower chance of divorce (Perloff & Farbisz, 1985; Weinstein, 1980). This tendency has been termed illusory superiority (Buunk & van der Eljnden, 1997) given that it is obviously not possible for the majority to be better than the average. It does appear, however, that people are more likely to perceive their relationships as superior to others when they are more committed to their relationship (Rusbult et al., 2000) or actually do have higher relationship satisfaction (Buunk & van der Eljnden, 1997).

Our tendency to perceive our relationship as better than the relationships of others may be, in part, a function of current perceived threats to the relationship. Frye and Karney

(2002) examined comparison strategies for couples dealing with problems of varying severity. Consistent with downward comparison theory (Wills, 1981), they hypothesized that couples should be more likely to compare with others' relationships that are worse than their own when dealing with serious problems in order to improve confidence in their own relationship. Although the authors failed to find that couples experiencing serious problems believed their relationships to be superior to others', they did find that these couples had a higher likelihood of believing that the problems in the relationship had improved over time. In other words, rather than engaging in a social comparison, they protected their esteem for the relationship by making temporal comparisons, or comparisons with their own relationship over varying points in time.

A prominent close relationships theory, Thibaut and Kelley's interdependence theory (1959), considers both temporal and social comparisons as predictors of relationship satisfaction. According to this theory, satisfaction with and dependence on our relationships is, in part, a function of our comparison level and our comparison level for alternatives. Our comparison level is based on our past experiences in relationships (i.e. temporal comparisons) as well as our perceptions of others' relationships (i.e., social comparisons). These comparisons help us to form our expectations for how a good relationship should be. Comparison level for alternatives concerns the outcomes we believe we could attain if we left our current relationship in favor of the best alternative relationship. We are more likely to experience a happy and stable relationship if our current relationship is perceived to be superior to relationships we have had in the past, our perceptions of others' relationships, and our current alternatives (i.e., when our relationship is judged to exceed the comparison level and comparison level for alternatives). In cases where people perceive that they have had

better outcomes in the past, that others have better outcomes than themselves, or if they believe that they would attain better outcomes by leaving the relationship (i.e., when their relationship is judged to fall short of their comparison level and comparison level for alternatives), relationship satisfaction and stability are diminished.

Important to interdependence theory is the idea that satisfaction is a function of how discrepant our outcomes are from our expectations. In other words, although two people might be experiencing similar outcomes, their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with those outcomes may differ depending on how those outcomes measure up to their standards and expectations. Work on loneliness, for example, shows us that whether or not a person experiences loneliness depends on whether or not that person perceives that his or her interpersonal bonds and social ties meet his or her expectations (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

Interdependence theory also has social exchange ramifications. From a social exchange perspective (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), our satisfaction with our relationship is a function of the rewards and costs of the relationship. Relationships tend to be more satisfying when they are perceived as equitable in that we are getting as much out of the relationship as we are putting into the relationship. People should be most likely to further invest in a relationship if they perceive that their future rewards will continue to be high (Levinger & Huesmann, 1980). Our perceptions of rewards, costs, and equity are, in part, a function of our expectations for rewards and costs. These expectations are formed in large part by the comparison level (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Despite the prominence of interdependence theory, very few studies have actually investigated the phenomenon of comparison level (Broemer & Diehl, 2003; Michaels,

Edwards, & Acock, 1984; Morrow & O'Sullivan, 1998) and its effect on relationship satisfaction and stability. Broemer and Diehl (2003), using interdependence theory as a starting point, hypothesized the influence of social comparison processes on relationship satisfaction will be a function of how similar or different one perceives one's relationship to be from the comparison target. People can either take an assimilative focus, in which they focus on similarities to the comparison target, or a contrastive focus, in which they focus on differences between their own relationship and the comparison target (Smith, 2000). In situations where we believe we are similar to a high standard, we should be more satisfied than when we feel we are significantly dissimilar from that high standard (Broemer & Diehl, 2003). In their study, Broemer and Diehl asked participants to compare their own relationships with either a stereotypically happy couple or a stereotypically distressed couple. Results of the study indicated that, for participants asked to compare to an ideal relationship, people tend more towards diminished relationship satisfaction and perceived threat when they perceive their relationship as significantly different from their high ideals for a good relationship, rather than assimilating toward the ideal. Similarly, perceiving one's own relationship as similar to that of a stereotypically distressed couple is associated with diminished relationship satisfaction whereas focusing on the differences between one's own relationship and the relationship of a stereotypically distressed couple is associated with higher relationship satisfaction. In other words, the results of social comparisons to idealistic or negative targets depend on how similar the comparison targets' relationships are judged to be to a person's own relationship experiences.

There is evidence that some people are more likely to socially compare than are others. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) proposed that there are differences in social comparison

orientation (SCO), with people high on SCO more likely to actively observe others' outcomes. In turn, level of SCO appears to moderate how much exposure to comparison targets affects peoples' perceptions of their own relationships (Buunk, 2006). For example, Buunk (2006) found that when participants were exposed to a high standard comparison target couple, those higher in SCO with high relationship satisfaction were more likely to identify with the comparison couple and experience positive affect about their own relationships than were couples lower in SCO or those who did not have high relationship satisfaction.

One reason social comparisons are important to relationships is that they help to form more general relationship standards that affect not only our perceptions of our current relationship, but also our ideas of what a good relationship should look like. Wayment (2005) did an exploratory study in which participants were asked to describe their standards for relationships and what kind of information was used to form these standards. Open responses given to describe standards were coded as falling into one or more of 30 relationship standards described by Vangelisti and Daly (1997), including such characteristics as fidelity and respect. Responses for how the standards had been formed were coded into categories of objective information, social comparisons, temporal comparisons, and idealized images. Results showed that 21% of participants' relationship standards were formed from objective information such as books about relationships, 49% were formed from comparisons with past experiences, 22% were formed from social comparisons, and 8% were formed from idealized images of relationships, such as what is often portrayed in the media.

Media and Social Comparison

Although the work on social comparisons to media portrayals is limited, there are a number of research areas that may aid in our understanding, including work on social learning theory, body image studies, work on the third-person effect, and script theory. I will discuss each of these areas in turn.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1979; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961) posits that we learn social behavior by observing and imitating the behavior of others. We are particularly likely to imitate behavior if we see that it has been reinforced in others. One important area in which social learning theory has been demonstrated is in the effect of sexual content in the media on adolescent sexual behavior. A number of studies have established that the more exposure teens have to sexually explicit media, the more likely they will be sexually active (e.g., Brown, 2002; Chia, 2006; Chia & Gunther, 2006; L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006). In a similar vein, there is a wide array of research that shows that the more violent media people (and children in particular) are exposed to, the more aggressive they will be (e.g., Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz et al., 2003; Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Gentile, 2003). Prosocial behavior (such as friendly, positive interactions or altruism) is also more likely to occur following exposure to prosocial media content (Hearald, 1986; Mares & Woodard, 2007). It is also possible that social comparison processes are occurring in which people are looking to the behavior of others (in this case, in the media) to help them develop their perceived norms and expectations, and in turn, their own behaviors. At the same time, social learning theory could be applied to much of the work on social comparison, with people looking to others to learn what is a socially acceptable and 'good' behavior for them to imitate.

The media frequently portrays relationships as extremely positive and idealistic, conveying the idea that couples live happily ever after with very little conflict. With the exception of Wayment (2005), no known studies have examined how we socially compare our own relationships to romantic relationships portrayed in the media. There is, however, a considerable literature examining social comparison of body image to media ideals, which may serve as a template for examining media social comparisons of relationships.

There has been a move in recent years towards extreme standards of thinness in our culture, facilitated by idealized images of women in the media (Grogan, 1999). Thanks in large part to digital photo retouching, strict diets, and eating disorders, models and images of women in general in the media have encouraged women to follow suit in the pursuit of thinness. A number of studies have found that exposure to these 'ideal' images has damaging effects on women, including body dissatisfaction (Harrison & Cantor, 1997) and an increased incidence of eating disorders (Stice & Shaw, 1994). It has been found that social comparison is an important moderator in this relationship, with women who have higher social comparison orientations more likely to be adversely affected by idealized images (Bessenoff, 2006). There is also evidence that the more central one's body image is to one's identity and when a standard is deemed as relevant, social comparison processes are more likely to come into play to affect assessments of one's self (Scheier & Carver, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Wood (1989) points out that being exposed to idealized images, like those displayed in the media, can force people into an upward social comparison, which can be detrimental to self-esteem and lead to more negative assessments of one's self. Additionally, it has been found that the more a person is exposed to these idealized images, i.e., the more time he or she spends engaged in observing the media, the stronger the effect (Tiggermann &

Pickering, 1996). Cultivation theory posits that the more exposure one has to the media, the more one perceives media images as indicative of reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) because the same messages are given time and time again.

The third-person effect (Gunther, 1991) involves the idea that most people believe others to be more susceptible to influences from the media than are they themselves. This concept follows from research on illusions of unique invulnerability (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), or the idea that we usually perceive ourselves to be less vulnerable to negative influences than are others. The third-person effect may be particularly likely in situations where downward social comparisons are possible (Duck & Mullin, 1995). In other words, when we have the ability to look at others who are doing much worse than ourselves, we perceive ourselves as being much less at risk, or vulnerable, to negative influences. In one study of social comparison, the third-person effect was reduced when participants were prompted to compare with a specific other, such as a parent or closest friend, rather than being given a more vague instruction to compare with any friend or any college student (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986). So, they believed that close friends or family were similarly insusceptible to negative media effects. It was believed that these results stemmed from participants being prevented from choosing a vague other (and thus choosing a negative prototype that would make them feel better), but rather thinking about a specific close other, whom they would be motivated to protect and thus not belittle in favor of their own well-being.

Duck and Mullin (1995) examined whether the impact of the third-person effect differed as a function of the media content to which one was exposed. Participants were asked to estimate the effect that negative media content (such as violence), positive media content (such as prosocial behavior), or public service media content (such as messages about

drunk driving) had on themselves and others. Results indicated that participants had a much stronger self-protective tendency, or third person effect, for the negative media content. So, although they felt immune to the influences of negative media content, they were more likely to admit an influence of positive media content.

Script theory posits that peoples' behaviors and interactions are governed by socially accepted rules and sequences (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). Much like the script of a play, many kinds of generic social interactions (such as a first date or job interview) are expected to follow a certain sequence of events. In the area of sexual behavior, for instance, research has established that scripts prescribe the appropriate sequence of events leading up to intercourse (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) and that this sequence is universally understood by people in American culture (Jemail & Geer, 1977). In the area of close relationships more generally, scripts have been applied to the appropriate sequence of events for initiating and developing relationships (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004). There is some evidence that we may learn certain scripts via exposure to the media (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Much like cultivation theory's (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) idea that constant exposure to media images leads to a belief that such images are realistic, script theory looking at media influence posits that if we are exposed again and again to similar relationship themes in the media, we may adopt a perception that those portrayals represent reality. In turn, those media portrayals of relationships may shape our expectations for our own relationships.

CHAPTER 3: THE CURRENT STUDIES

As previously discussed, the study of social comparison in relationships is still very new and many questions remain unanswered. My goal was to examine how social comparisons with family, friends, and the media influence how people assess the quality and stability of their own romantic relationships. Although there have been a few studies on relationship social comparison, very few have examined the effects of specific comparison targets and none have examined social comparisons to media portrayals of relationships Additionally, I sought to examine how potential moderators, including media exposure and social comparison orientation, affect the influence of comparisons on peoples' perceptions of relationship quality and stability.

First addressing the study of specific comparison targets, to whom we choose to socially compare has major ramifications for the assessments we make of ourselves and our resulting well-being. No known studies have examined how our social comparisons with family, friends, or media portrayals each specifically affect perceptions of our own relationships. There is reason to expect that the effects of each could be important.

Looking at our reflections upon the relationships of family members, for instance, it has been found that children whose parents have divorced are more likely themselves to eventually be divorced in adulthood (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001), with one study finding that children of divorce have twice the risk of divorce of the general population (Amato & Deboer, 2001). Why this trend exists is still unclear. Amato and DeBoer (2001) examined differential commitment to marriage and exposure to pre-divorce marital discord as potential mediators, finding that people who had experienced parental divorce developed perceptions of marriage as less than a lifelong commitment.

Tallman and colleagues posited that a social learning process could be operating as well (Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001), where children observe and imitate the behaviors of their parents that could lead to increased incidence of divorce, such as poor communication strategies and negativity. I hypothesized that a social comparison process may be occurring, where exposure to divorce could contribute to peoples' expectations about their own relationships. We may be socially comparing with the relationships of our parents as we evaluate our own relationships and thus form expectations. Relatively few studies have examined peoples' social comparisons with family members (Bordia & Blau, 2003; Carr, 2004; McHale, Kim, & Whiteman, 2006; Moss & Moss, 1989; Szivos, 1991; Taylor & Vest, 1992; Uchida & Fuchigami, 1995). Areas that have emerged demonstrating important family member social comparison influences include learning (Szivos, 1991), development (McHale, Kim, & Whiteman, 2006), and career accomplishments and pay (Bordia & Blau, 2003; Carr, 2004; Taylor & Vest, 1992). No known studies have examined romantic relationship social comparisons with family members.

Much of the social comparison research has a focus on comparisons with friends, the peer group, or others of equal status (e.g., Lane et al., 2002; Gibbons et al., 2000). Thus, the importance of looking at friends as social comparison targets in the current study should be evident. The influence of one's peers through social comparison processes has been demonstrated time and time again in such areas as sexual behavior (DiBlasio & Benda, 1992; Furstenberg, Moore, & Peterson, 1986; Miller et al., 1997), adolescent health risk behaviors such as smoking and drinking (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995), and body image (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Friends, and close friends in particular, appear to act as the standard against which people most frequently compare (Mussweiler & Ruter, 2003). People tend to rate the

behaviors and outcomes of friends more positively than behaviors and outcomes of peers in general (Suls, Lemos, & Steward, 2002). Interestingly, the successes of friends may be particularly threatening to one's self-perceptions (Zuckerman & Jost, 2001). Apparently, there are gender differences (established in adolescents) in what kinds of friends' successes are most threatening (Benenson & Benarroch, 1998). Benensosn and Benarroch (1998) found that boys were more concerned with the successes of their friends' athletics, whereas girls were more troubled by their friends' successes in close relationships, attractiveness, and popularity. It appears that our *perceptions* of our friends' (and others' in general) behaviors and outcomes are more important than our friends' (and others') *actual* behaviors and outcomes in determining our decisions and self-assessments (DiBlasio & Benda, 1992; Furstenberg, Moore, & Peterson, 1986; Miller et al., 1997). Therefore, in the current study, the influence of relationship quality and stability of the comparison target family and friends was examined from the perspective of the participants, rather than via direct assessment of the relationships of comparison targets.

Turning to social comparisons with media portrayals of relationships, given that no known work has addressed this area, it is difficult to predict what will be found. The study of body image social comparisons to media images may offer some clues. As alluded to above, idealized images of women in the media affect women's perceptions of their own bodies and well-being. I submit that there are similarly many idealized images of relationships portrayed in the media. Given that relationships are central to our identities, and thus high in the self-relevance domain that predicts the need to socially compare (Festinger, 1954), our perceptions of what a good relationship is will likely be affected by the media's portrayal of

relationships. Additionally, we may suffer similar decrements in well-being and relationship satisfaction if we feel that we do not measure up to that ideal.

Different forms of media may offer different portrayals of relationships. Movies featuring a romantic storyline (e.g., *Sleepless in Seattle*), which need to have their plots neatly tied up in the span of about two hours, are particularly likely to resolve with a 'happily ever after' ending that suggests the relationship will be smooth sailing from there on out. Many couples depicted in movies tend to avoid conflict, which may provide an upward comparison for viewers. If viewers observe that a 'good' relationship is one without conflict, they may encounter doubts and lower perceived stability of their own relationships if they do encounter conflict. The idea that disagreements are destructive is a dysfunctional relationship belief that is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and less willingness to engage in productive conflict (Goodwin & Gaines, 2004). These media influences may contribute to our perceptions of norms in relationships and what we should be able to expect from a 'good' relationship. In a similar vein to the body image social comparison literature (Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996), it is likely that the more exposure one has to these media portrayals of relationships, the more they may influence our perceptions of our own outcomes.

In addition to idealized images of relationships frequently portrayed in some movies and television, there are also many movies that portray a decidedly negative or cynical view of relationships. These movies (such as *War of the Roses*, for example) focus on such themes as conflict, hostility, and the inevitability of relationship failure. Such messages may skew peoples' perceptions of relationship trends. Looking at divorce, for example, studies have shown us that the divorce rate topped out at around 50% in the 1980s and has since leveled

off and even come down (Peck, 1993). The divorce rate in the U.S. is now at its lowest level since 1970 (Crary, 2007). Despite the fall in the divorce rate, it is still a common notion that Americans are plagued by an increasingly high rate of divorce (Crary, 2007). Therefore, it appears that many of us hold a false belief about the rate of divorce. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a false belief leads to its own fulfillment (Madon et al., 2003; Rosenthal, 2003). It is possible that if people internalize the idea that divorce is common, a message that is likely being formed in part by exposure to media messages about divorce, they themselves may be more accepting of divorce, less committed to the institution of marriage, and less willing to work through adversity in their relationships. It is also possible, conversely, that negative portrayals of relationships in the media may empower people to engage in downward comparisons that makes them feel better about their own relationship, rather than worse.

Study 1

Many studies of social comparison ask participants to compare with vague others (such as any friend or college student), which leads to a tendency to compare to a negative prototype that will make them feel better about their own outcomes (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), a phenomenon known as downward comparison (Wills, 1981). In order to further explore how upward versus downward comparisons affect evaluations of one's own relationship quality and stability, participants were asked to reflect on either the relationship of a close family member, close friend, or a familiar media portrayal. They were then asked to assess their own relationship quality and stability. Whether or not the chosen target reflected an upward or downward comparison was also assessed (as was the influence of self-esteem on this choice). I hypothesized that downward comparison targets would be more frequently

chosen so that people can self-enhance, or in this case, relationship-enhance. This hypothesis follows from the demonstrated prevalence of positive illusions in relationships (Buunk & van der Eljnden, 1997; Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Frye, & Kaney, 2002; Perloff & Farbisz, 1985; Weinstein, 1980). If most people tend to compare with the relationships of others doing worse than themselves (rather than looking at more representative portrayals), this would explain illusory superiority (Buunk & van der Eljnden, 1997), or the idea that the majority tends to believe they are better than the average. I hypothesized that downward comparisons would predict high levels of perceived relationship quality, given the self-enhancing (or in this case, relationship-enhancing) aspect of downward comparison (Wills, 1981). Conversely, I hypothesized that upward comparisons would predict lower levels of perceived relationship quality and stability. Having focused on relationships that are better than their own, they would likely have more negative beliefs about their own relationship (because it is worse) than they would have had otherwise. It is also possible, consistent with the work of Frye and Karney (2002), that comparison to another who is doing better would induce a threat to the participants' perceptions of their own relationship quality, and would thus result in a defensive effect in which participants would inflate their ratings of their own relationship in an attempt to fend off the threat. In other words, it is possible that upward comparison would lead participants to exaggerate the positive qualities of their relationship in order to make themselves feel better about that relationship in comparison to the upward comparison target.

I hypothesized that the effect of upward versus downward comparisons would also depend on how similar participants believed their own relationship was to that of the comparison target. In other words, if participants felt that their relationship was highly

similar to the relationship of an upward comparison target, that should threaten their beliefs about their own relationship to a lesser extent than if they felt that their relationship was very different from that of the upward comparison target. In a similar vein, if participants felt that their relationship was very similar to that of a downward comparison target, they would likely not enjoy the same kinds of relationship-enhancing effects that those who felt that their relationship was very different from that of a downward comparison target. This idea is consistent with the work of Broemer and Diehl (2003) who found that participants' perceptions of similarity to comparison targets (i.e., taking an assimilative versus contrastive approach), determined how that comparative information influenced perceptions of their own relationships. I hypothesized that the strength of the effect of social comparison on perceptions of one's own relationship would be stronger for females than males given the previous work by Benenson and Benarroch (1998) demonstrating that social comparisons of close relationships are particularly important to females.

Given that it has been established that the more one is exposed to the media, the more likely it will have effects on one's behavior and well-being (Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996), media exposure was measured. The measure used also examined the favorite movies and television shows of participants and the ways relationships were portrayed in these movies and television shows. I hypothesized that participants who had had more exposure to the media would experience greater effects of social comparison on their perceptions of their own relationships. This follows from several lines of media research (including cultivation theory) demonstrating that the more exposure one has to the media, the more effects said media will have (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996), and follows from work with script theory (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004, Duran &

Prusank, 1997; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) indicating that typical relationship themes portrayed time and time again in the media may be used to form peoples' relationship expectations. Thus, those whose favorite television shows and movies portray relationships positively should develop higher expectations for their own relationships than those who favor media with more negative relationship content.

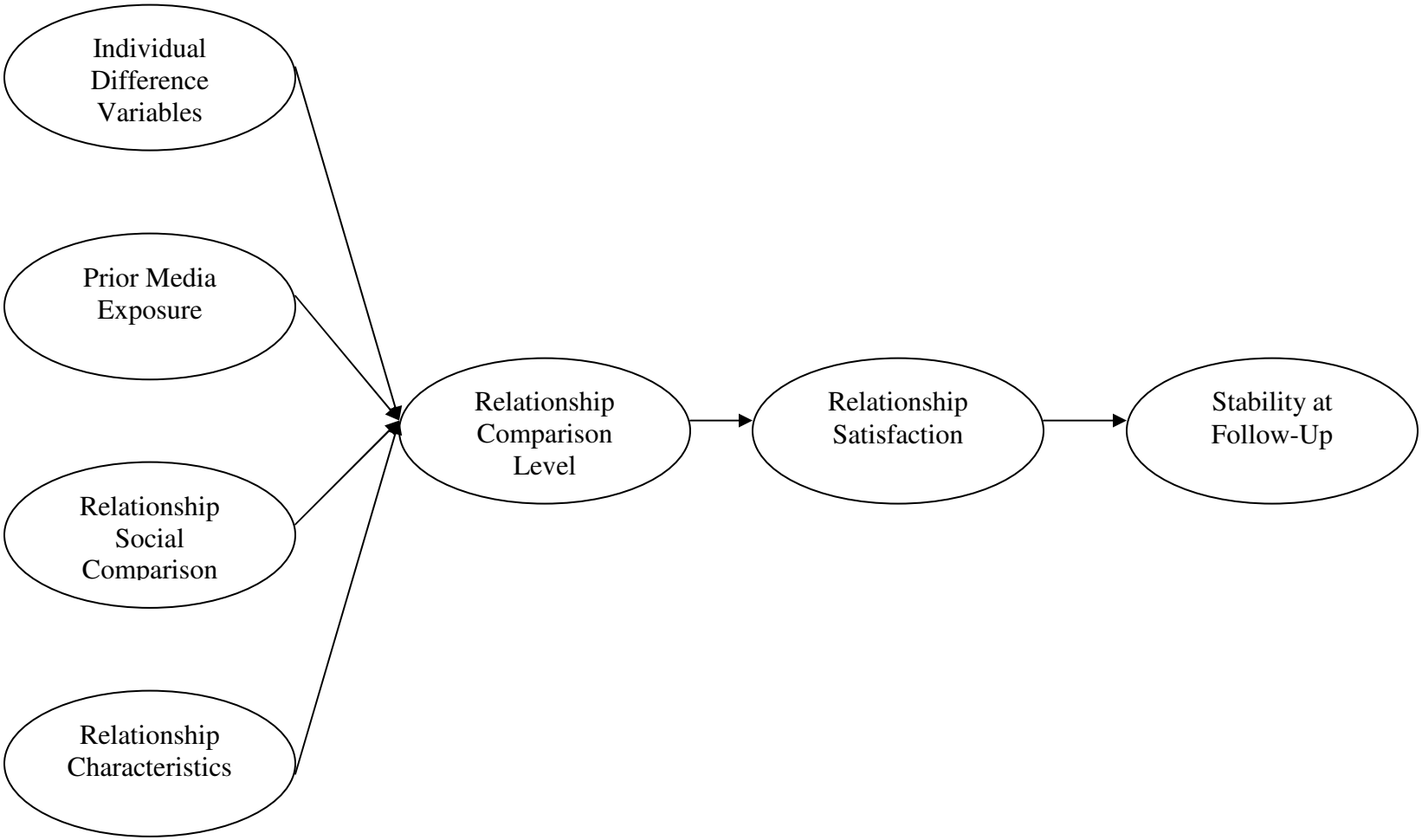
I also examined the individual difference characteristic of self-esteem, given that it is a well-established correlate of social comparison (Wills, 1981). Lower levels of self-esteem were hypothesized to be particularly prominent in people who favor downward social comparisons, comparing with others doing worse in order to make themselves feel better (Hakmiller, 1966; Wills, 1981). So, those with lower self-esteem, attempting to feel better about themselves and their relationships, should have been particularly likely to tend to choose downward target relationships with which to compare, and the relationship-enhancing benefits of these downward comparisons should have led to higher ratings of relationship quality and stability.

Following from previous work (Buunk, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), social comparison orientation was hypothesized to moderate the effect of reflections on the comparison target's relationship on the participants' own perceived relationship quality and stability. Those who are higher in social comparison orientation (SCO) should have had relationship quality and stability that are more strongly influenced by reflections on others' relationships than those who are lower in SCO.

In order to assess how characteristics of one's relationship measure up against the expectations one has formed via social comparisons, I assessed relationship comparison level using the Marital Comparison Level Index (Sabatelli, 1984), which examines how our

perceptions of our own relationships measure up to our expectations for relationships. I hypothesized that the social comparisons that participants were asked to make (and whether they represented upward or downward comparisons) would predict relationship comparison level. Consistent with interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1959), relationship comparison level was hypothesized to influence other assessments of perceived relationship quality and stability. In other words, I believe that the social comparisons made will shape expectations for romantic relationships, and in turn, shape whether or not people perceived that their own romantic relationships meet those expectations. Under circumstances in which expectations are shaped by downward comparisons, it should be more likely that people will perceive that their own relationship outcomes meet that set of standards than is the case in circumstances in which upward comparisons form inflated and more unattainable expectations. The hypothesized conceptual model for Study 1 can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Conceptual model of social comparison impact on relationship quality and stability*



Study 2

In Study 2, I examined how a forced comparison to either a positive and idealistic media portrayal of relationships or a negative media portrayal of relationships affects participants' perceptions of their own relationship. After an initial assessment of relationship quality, participants were asked to watch two clips from movies that offered either a positive or a negative perspective on relationships (or participated in a control condition that did not view movie clips). They were then asked to complete a questionnaire in which they evaluated the relationships in the movie clips on relationship quality, intensity, positivity, and negativity. Also included in that questionnaire was an assessment of media exposure and self-esteem. In the second part of Study 2, framed as a separate study, participants evaluated their own relationships on a number of dimensions, including relationship satisfaction, social support, problems in the relationship, and perceived stability. Social comparison orientation was also assessed. I hypothesized that exposure to a negative relationship media portrayal would lead to higher levels of relationship satisfaction given that, most likely, a downward comparison would be made that would bolster peoples' confidence about their own relationships. I also hypothesized that exposure to a positive and idealistic media portrayal of relationships would result in lower ratings of relationship satisfaction given that, most likely, an upward comparison would have been made that could make participants feel as though their relationship was not as good as that portrayed in the film. I also examined how participants' prior media exposure related to their perceptions of their own relationships. The media exposure measure used examined not only the amount of time that individuals spent engaged in observing media, but also what kinds of movies and television shows they preferred and how relationships are portrayed in these movies and television shows. I

hypothesized that prior media exposure would moderate the effect of the movie clip on participants' perceptions of their own relationships. Specifically, I hypothesized that participants who favor movies and television shows that portrayed mostly positive or idealistic messages about relationships would be more affected by the positive movie clip because that movie clip depicted a message that they had favored in their own media choices. Conversely, people who favor movies and television shows that portrayed more negative or cynical messages about relationships would be more affected by the negative movie clip for the same reason. Similar to Study 1, social comparison orientation, similarity to the comparison target, and gender were examined as moderators of the relationship between comparison condition and perceptions of one's own relationship.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY 1 METHOD

In order to examine the effects of social comparison to family, friends, and the media on relationship quality and perceived stability, questionnaire data were collected. It was previously determined that a minimum of 45 participants would be run in each of the three conditions (comparison target of family, friend, or familiar media portrayal) for a total *N* of at least 135. This number was determined by consulting Cohen's (1992) work on power, which prescribes a minimum of 45 participants per group in order to achieve power of .80 for a medium effect size (*d* of .25 or higher) with $p < .05$ for an ANOVA examining differences between groups. Participants ($N = 324$) were recruited through undergraduate psychology courses where credit was given for research participation. Twenty participants had to be eliminated from the analyses because they skipped critical non-scale (single) items that could not be reasonably extrapolated, such as items on perceptions of relationship stability, resulting in a final *N* of 304, 223 of whom were female and 81 of whom were male. A current romantic relationship was a prerequisite for participation. Relationship status of participants included 35 dating casually, 243 dating seriously, 17 engaged, and 9 married. Participants were asked to evaluate the relationship of either their mother or father ($n = 105$), a close friend ($n = 100$) or a familiar media portrayal ($n = 99$). Of the 304 participants, 205 participated in an optional follow-up approximately three months later. Participants received one research credit in exchange for their participation.

Measures

Participants were first asked to disclose their gender and current relationship status. For current relationship status, they were asked to choose from the following options: 1)

Dating casually, 2) Dating seriously 3) Engaged, or 4) Married. They were also asked to report how many months they had been in their current relationship.

Measures used appear in Appendix A. The individual difference variables included media exposure, self-esteem, parental divorce, perceived divorce rate, and social comparison orientation. Media exposure was assessed using items adapted from Gentile's General Media Habits Questionnaire (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004; Gentile, Walsh, Ellison, Fox, & Cameron, 2004; Hauge & Gentile, 2003). This measure has been validated in numerous studies (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004; Gentile, Walsh, Ellison, Fox, & Cameron, 2004; Hauge & Gentile, 2003) and includes items such as, "What are your five favorite movies/DVDs/videos?" and "On a typical week day (Monday through Friday), for how many hours do you watch TV/videos during each of the following times? 6 am – Noon? Noon – 6 pm? 6 pm – Midnight? Midnight – 6 am?" Prior positive and negative relationship media exposure was assessed by having participants rate the positivity and negativity of relationship portrayals in their five favorite movies and television shows. An average of positive and negative relationship prior media exposure was then calculated. Additionally, participants reported the numbers of hours per week that they watched television or movies. Self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale, a widely used 10-item scale that has been validated in numerous studies (e.g., Bagley, Bolithho, & Bertrand, 1997; Greenberger et al., 2003; Vermillion & Dodder, 2007) and includes such items as "I feel I do not have much to be proud of," which participants are asked to rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Participants were asked to answer yes or no to the question "Are your parents divorced?" They were also asked to estimate the current rate of divorce as a percentage.

Social comparison orientation was assessed using Gibbons & Buunk's (1999) Iowa-Netherland Comparison Orientation measure, an 11-item measure that asks participants to rate their agreement on a Likert-type scale with statements such as, "I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in my life." Reliability has been established in numerous studies ($\alpha = .82$ in Buunk, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and the scale has demonstrated discriminant validity through a lack of significant correlation with social desirability (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Now turning to comparison target perceived relationship quality and stability, a number of measures were used for the social comparisons participants were asked to make. Participants were randomly assigned to assess the relationship of either a close family member, close friend, or media portrayal. Instructions for the particular comparison target assigned varied slightly with condition. For the close family member condition, participants were asked to, "Consider the romantic relationship of either your mother or father if they are not still together. If they are together, please rate the relationship they have with each other. If neither of your parents is in a relationship, you may complete the following measures on your perceptions of the relationship of a sibling, aunt, uncle, or other close family member currently involved in a relationship." For the close friend condition, participants were asked to, "Consider the romantic relationship of one of your close friends. Please complete the following measures on your perception of that relationship." For the media portrayal condition, participants were asked to, "Consider a movie or television show that you have seen in the last 4 weeks that has a storyline addressing intimate relationships. Please complete the following measures on your perception of the central relationship." For each of the three conditions, participants were asked to reveal their specific target choice.

In order to assess the relationship of the comparison target, participants completed measures of relationship satisfaction, social support, problems experienced, and perceived stability for either a chosen close family member (such as a parent or sibling), a close friend, or their choice of a representative media portrayal of a relationship. Participants also completed items assessing whether the comparison target represented an upward or downward comparison as well as the level of similarity of the comparison target's relationship with the participant's own current relationship. Both of these assessments came after participants had assessed their own relationships, to avoid demand effects.

Relationship satisfaction was assessed using a modified 4-item version of Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale, appropriately worded to address the relationship of the assigned comparison target. Validity of this scale has been demonstrated in multiple studies (Hendrick, 1988) with strong correlations with love, commitment, and Spanier's (1976) considerably longer (32-tem) Dyadic Adjustment Scale. A sample item, with responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale is, "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" For the current study, items assessing the comparison target's relationship were worded in a format similar to, "In general, how satisfied is this couple with their relationship?" Perceived social support from partner was assessed using Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale short version which assesses emotional support from partner, alliance, guidance, social integration, and reassurance of worth from one's partner. This 10-item measure has demonstrated high reliability in past studies ($\alpha = .87$ in Wesner, 2006) and validity has been supported in numerous studies (Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Mancini & Blieszner, 1992; Mott, Dishman, Saunders, Dowda, & Pate, 2004). Cutrona and Russell (1987) demonstrated validity through significant correlations of the

scale with known aspects of social support (e.g., number of supportive network members, $p <$ .001). A sample item is: "If something went wrong, you feel (your partner) would not come to your assistance. Do you 1) strongly agree, 2) agree, 3) disagree, or 4) strongly disagree?" For the comparison portion of the current study, items were worded in a format such as, "If something went wrong, these partners would not come to one another's assistance." Problems in the relationship were assessed with the Marital Problems Inventory developed by Geiss and O'Leary (1981), a 29-item list of the most frequent problems experienced in relationships. Participants are asked to circle each problem that has been experienced from such choices as communication, jealousy, and physical abuse. In order to assess perceived stability of the relationship of the comparison target, participants were asked to name a percentage between 0 and 100% in response to the question, "What do you believe the chances are that this relationship will still be together in 6 months?" "5 years?" "For the duration of the couple's lifetime?" The three responses were then averaged. In order to assess whether participants had made upward versus downward comparisons, they were asked, "How does the relationship you assessed earlier compare to your current romantic relationship? Is it 1) Much worse, 2) Slightly worse, 3) About the same, 4) Slightly Better, or 5) Much better?" In order to assess similarity to the participant's own current relationship, they were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Not at all similar) to 10 (Very similar) to the question, "How similar is the relationship you assessed earlier to your own romantic relationship?"

Participants' perceptions of their own romantic relationship characteristics, quality and stability, were assessed using the relationship satisfaction, social support, problems experienced, and stability measures discussed above. To assess how participants' current

relationship measures up to their relationship comparison level, the Marital Comparison Level Index (MCLI) developed by Sabatelli (1984) was used. This 36-item measure, which is also appropriate for use with non-married participants, assesses how participants' various relationship characteristics differ from their expectations. On a 7-point scale, they report if their current experiences fall far below their expectations, meet their expectations, or far exceed their expectations. A sample characteristic is, "The degree to which your needs are met." Higher scores indicate that relationship expectations tend to met or exceeded in the current relationship. Validity for the scale has been established (Sabatelli, 1984).

Finally, in order to examine the longitudinal effects of social comparisons on relationships, participants who agreed to participate in a follow-up were contacted again three to four months later (at the end of the semester) to determine which relationships were still together and how differences in outcome related to the kinds of social comparison targets (i.e., upward versus downward) people chose. Specifically, I examined if relationship dissolution was more likely to follow upward versus downward comparisons with others as well as how stability was impacted by relationship characteristics such as comparison level and relationship satisfaction.

CHAPTER 5: STUDY 1 RESULTS

First, descriptive statistics were computed for all of the individual difference characteristics, social comparison assessments and orientation, and relationship quality and stability variables (see Table 1). Inter-item reliability coefficient αs are also reported for multi-item scales. Comparison relationships were evaluated as upward for 118 participants, downward for 120 participants, and essentially the same for 66 participants. The data showed no greater tendency for downward rather than upward comparisons.

In order to determine if there were significant differences between those who did versus did not participate in the study follow-up (differential attrition), independent samples *t*-tests were performed on all study variables. The only difference that emerged was for social comparison orientation, such that those who refused to participate in the study follow-up tended to have somewhat higher social comparison orientations ($m = 8.30$, $sd = 2.16$) than those that agreed to participate in the follow-up ($m = 7.73$, $sd = 2.38$; $t(302) = 2.04$, $p < .05$). Social comparison orientation, however, had little impact on the majority of outcomes of interest, as can be seen in the analyses discussed below, so it is unlikely that this difference should be cause for concern when interpreting results for analyses that include follow-up data.

A correlation table was prepared to examine the first-order relationships among study variables, as can be seen in Table 2. Several interesting findings emerged. Women tended to report more positive relationship media exposure from their favorite movies and television shows, more social support from their partners, fewer relationship problems, and higher relationship comparison levels than men. Participants in more committed relationships, in addition to having higher relationship satisfaction, perceived stability, and likelihood of still

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for individual difference variables, social comparisons, and relationship quality and stability variables of interest for Study 1 (N = 304)*

Variable	Min.	Max.	*M(or %)*	*SD*	*α*
Relationship duration (in months)	0	229	19.26	22.25	
Parental divorce	0	1	19.1%	0.39	
Perceived divorce rate	2	95	46.92%	12.93	
Prior positive media exposure	6.17	55.1	27.48	8.84	
Prior negative media exposure	2	39.4	18.14	6.44	
Hours per week watching TV/videos	0	29	8.54	4.75	
Self-esteem	18	40	32.40	4.49	0.88
Others' relationship satisfaction	6	20	16.12	3.29	0.85
Others' social support from partner	14	40	31.71	5.02	0.86
Others' relationship problems	0	23	5.71	3.56	
Others' relationship stability	0	100	73.06	32.47	

Table 1, *Descriptive statistics for individual difference variables, social comparisons, and relationship quality and stability variables of interest for Study 1 (N = 304), cont.*

Variable	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	*α*
Relationship satisfaction	6	20	17.48	2.68	0.80
Social support from partner	16	40	34.41	4.20	0.80
Relationship problems	0	14	4.32	2.65	
Relationship comparison level	-38.31	89.86	37.72	22.09	0.89
Perceived relationship stability	0	100	75.02	25.48	
Upward vs. downward comparison	-1	1	-0.01	0.89	
Similarity of comparison relationship to own	4	40	21.17	8.73	0.83
Social comparison orientation	1	11	7.91	2.32	0.70
In follow-up	0	1	67% (n = 205)		
Together at follow-up	0	1	80% (n = 164)		
Relationship satisfaction at follow-up (if still together)	8	20	18.21	2.20	0.77

Table 2. *Correlations among relationship, assessments of others' relationship, and individual difference variables*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Gender	--										
2. Relationship status	-.07	--									
3. Relationship duration	-.09	.36***	--								
4. Parental divorce	-.05	.06	.01	--							
5. Perceived divorce rate	-.07	.05	.01	.14*	--						
6. Prior positive media exposure	-.16**	-.12*	-.10	.07	.12*	--					
7. Prior negative media exposure	-.05	-.10	-.14*	.08	.09	.41***	--				
8. Hours per week watching TV	.01	.04	-.02	.04	.08	.24***	.16**	--			
9. Self-esteem	.04	-.08	-.06	-.03	-.08	.05	-.07	-.05	--		
10. Others' relationship satisfaction	-.03	-.02	.07	-.06	-.01	.17**	-.09	.06	.16**	--	
11. Others' social support from partner	-.01	-.02	.08	-.05	.01	.17**	-.08	.04	.24***	.80***	--
12. Others' relationship problems	-.02	.01	-.16*	.18**	.11*	.04	.20***	.08	-.17**	-.55***	-.55***
13. Others' relationship stability	-.06	.04	.06	-.07	.01	.08	-.12*	.01	.13*	.66***	.54***
14. Relationship satisfaction	-.12*	.26***	.08	-.01	-.09	.10	-.05	.05	.16**	.04	.04
15. Social support from partner	-.12*	.10	-.01	-.07	-.10	.11	-.07	-.05	.29***	.05	.11

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 2, *Correlations among relationship, assessments of others' relationship, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	12.	13.	14.	15.
12. Others' relationship problems	--			
13. Others' relationship stability	-.40***	--		
14. Relationship satisfaction	.01	.00	--	
15. Social support from partner	-.04	.01	.74***	--

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 2, *Correlations among relationship, assessments of others' relationship, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
16. Relationship problems	.11*	-.07	-.02	.04	.04	.03	.09	.12*	-.22***	-.01	.00
17. Relationship comparison level	-.15**	.10	-.02	-.02	-.01	.14*	-.04	.06	.26***	.10	.13*
18. Perceived relationship stability	-.05	.41***	.22***	.01	-.12*	-.01	-.09	.05	.07	-.01	-.01
19. Upward versus downward comparison	.06	-.08	.07	-.01	.04	.08	.06	-.01	-.06	.33***	.33***
20. Similarity to comparison relationship	.05	.14*	.11*	.01	-.06	.08	-.04	.00	.08	.57***	.54***
21. Social comparison orientation	-.02	-.09	-.09	.08	.09	.07	.05	.10	-.11*	.02	-.02
22. In follow-up	.01	.07	.02	-.06	-.07	.01	.06	-.10	.03	.02	.06
23. Together at follow-up	.03	.19**	.05	-.06	-.15*	-.01	.00	.08	.03	-.11	-.06
24. Relationship satisfaction at follow-up	.03	.13	.10	-.14	-.06	-.03	.04	-.13	.16*	.06	.09

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 2, *Correlations among relationship, assessments of others' relationship, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.	20.	21.	22.	23.	24.
16. Relationship problems	.22***	.03	-.55***	-.53***	--								
17. Relationship comparison level	-.10	.00	.69***	.68***	-.51***	--							
18. Perceived relationship stability	-.02	.08	.76***	.55***	-.45***	.57***	--						
19. Upward versus downward comparison	-.22***	.33***	-.29***	-.24***	.21***	-.15**	-.24***	--					
20. Similarity to comparison relationship	-.37***	.49***	.21***	.16**	-.08	.18**	.22***	.27***	--				
21. Social comparison orientation	.11	-.01	-.10	-.12*	.18***	-.04	-.08	.13*	.01	--			
22. In follow-up	-.10	.02	-.01	.03	-.07	-.01	.06	-.02	.02	-.12*	--		
23. Together at follow-up	-.01	-.06	.46***	.32***	-.37***	.26***	.44***	-.19**	.17*	.01	n/a	--	
24. Relationship satisfaction at follow-up	-.08	-.02	.65***	.54***	-.39***	.51***	.50***	-.22**	.15	-.15	n/a	n/a	--

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

being together at the follow-up, tended to report less positive relationship media exposure. They also tended to believe they were more similar to the relationship with which they were asked to compare. Participants whose parents were divorced tended to believe the overall divorce rate was higher and to perceive more problems in the comparison others' relationship. Participants who believed the overall divorce rate was higher tended to have more positive relationship media exposure and tended to report more problems in the comparison others' relationship. They also tended to perceive their own relationship stability to be lower and actually had a higher chance of having broken up by the follow-up. People with more positive relationship media exposure tended to rate the comparison others' relationship as higher on satisfaction and support and they tended to have a higher relationship comparison level, while negative relationship media exposure was associated with more relationship problems in one's own relationship. Higher self-esteem was associated with more positive evaluations of the comparison target's relationship as well as a higher relationship comparison level and likelihood of still being in the relationship at follow-up. Participants who made a downward comparison tended to rate their satisfaction, support, perceived stability, and relationship comparison level as higher, and reported fewer relationship problems than participants who had made an upward comparison. Perceived similarity to comparison target was higher for participants who rated both their own and the others' relationship more positively on satisfaction, social support, and stability. Social comparison orientation was higher in participants with lower self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, and social support from partner, as well as those with more relationship problems. Additionally, social comparison orientation was higher for participants that had made an upward comparison.

In order to determine if there were differences in the association of different comparison targets (target of family member, friend, or media portrayal) with participants' ratings of the comparison relationship and their own, one-way ANOVAs were performed. As can be seen in Table 3, significant group differences were found for upward/downward comparison, all evaluations of others' relationships (stability, problems, social support, and satisfaction), and a marginal difference for similarity to comparison target. For significant ANOVAs, I conducted post-hoc analyses using Tukey tests to determine significant differences between comparisons with family, friends, or the media. Downward comparisons were more likely for TV/Movie relationship portrayals than for family members ($p < .05$) or, marginally, for close friends ($p < .10$). The relationships of close family members tended to be rated more positively than the relationships of close friends or TV/Movie portrayals, with higher stability, social support, and satisfaction (p's $< .05$), although assessment of relationship problems tended to be rated significantly lower in both family member and close friend relationships than in TV/Movie portrayals (p's $< .05$).

A regression was performed to examine the influence of self-esteem on choice of comparison target (upward, downwards, or about the same). The results of the regression were not significant ($B = -.01$, $SE\ B = .01$, $t = -1.03$, $p = .30$), indicating that level of self-esteem did not influence whether the comparison target was assessed as representing an upward, downward, or similar relationship.

In order to determine the potentially disparate effects of upward versus downward comparisons on perceptions of relationship quality and stability, I completed one-way ANOVAs examining differences on all the variables of interest for those who chose upward versus downward comparison targets (as assessed with the item discussed earlier asking

Table 3. *One-way ANOVAs examining differences in evaluations of own and other's relationship as a function of social comparison condition (family member, friend, or TV/Movie portrayal of relationships)*

	Family Member (n = 105)		Friend (n = 100)		TV/Movie Portrayal (n = 99)		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*
Upward/downward comparison	0.19	0.87	-0.07	0.87	-0.15	0.90	4.27*
Others' relationship stability	94.69	14.67	60.43	30.50	62.89	36.38	46.42***
Others' relationship problems	4.96	3.55	5.45	3.08	6.73	3.82	6.95***
Others' social support from partner	33.20	5.01	31.45	4.82	30.39	4.86	8.55***
Others' relationship satisfaction	17.30	2.83	15.78	3.25	15.22	3.46	11.66***
Similarity to comparison target	22.58	8.18	21.04	9.15	19.80	8.71	2.63†
Relationship problems	4.26	2.32	4.42	2.90	4.28	2.74	0.11
Social support from partner	34.69	3.57	33.85	4.76	34.65	4.21	1.28
Perceived stability	73.61	24.41	76.92	24.72	74.61	27.42	0.45
Relationship comparison level	38.12	22.18	37.71	23.57	37.30	20.60	0.15
Relationship satisfaction	17.51	2.33	17.39	2.91	17.55	2.80	0.10
Relationship together at follow-up	0.79	0.41	0.80	0.40	0.81	0.39	0.08

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

participants how the comparison relationship compares to their own) or believed their relationship was essentially the same as the that of the comparison target. The results, as can be seen in Table 4, indicate significant differences between groups for others' relationship characteristics and quality (stability, problems, social support, satisfaction), similarity to comparison target, and all characteristics of participants' own relationships (problems, social support, perceived stability, relationship comparison level, satisfaction, and stability at study follow-up). Additionally, a marginally significant result was found for social comparison orientation. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey tests determined differences between which groups (upward target, similar target, or downward target) were significant for each of the above significant ANOVAs. For evaluations of the target other's relationship, as would be expected, those assessed as representing a downward comparison were rated lower on stability, social support, and satisfaction, while being rated higher on relationship problems in comparison to those representing a similar or upward target (p's < .001). For the scale evaluating the similarity of participants' relationships to that of the comparison target, participants tended to rate themselves as more similar to an upward target than downward target (p < .001). For evaluations of one's own relationship, upward comparisons appeared to have a greater impact than comparisons to downward or similar targets, with participants who had made an upward comparison experiencing more relationship problems, lower social support from partner, lower perceived stability, lower relationship comparison level, lower relationship satisfaction, and lower likelihood of still being together at the study follow-up than were those who had made a similar or downward comparison (p's < .05).

Table 4. *One-way ANOVAs examining differences in variables of interest as a function of whether an upward, downward, or similar comparison target was chosen*

Variable	Downward Target (n = 120) *M*(or %)	*SD*	Similar Target (n = 66) *M*(or %)	*SD*	Upward Target (n = 118) *M*(or %)	*SD*	*F*
Gender[a]	Male: 24%		Male: 24%		Male: 31%		0.73
Relationship commitment/status[b]	2.04	0.51	2.02	0.45	1.95	0.61	0.91
Relationship duration	18.11	17.11	17.50	14.94	21.40	29.20	0.91
Parental divorce	20%		17%		19%		0.16
Perceived divorce rate	46.23%	12.11	47.35%	15.21	47.38%	12.43	0.28
Self-esteem	32.74	4.41	32.24	4.57	32.14	4.54	0.58
Social comparison orientation	7.62	2.30	7.76	2.49	8.31	2.21	2.85 †
Prior positive media exposure	26.42	8.22	28.54	9.47	27.97	9.05	1.53
Prior negative media exposure	17.97	6.64	17.21	5.59	18.83	6.65	1.42
Hours of TV per week	8.46	4.66	8.88	4.66	8.42	4.92	0.23
Others' relationship stability	57.84	35.76	85.54	22.73	81.57	27.29	25.72***
Others' relationship problems	6.94	3.93	4.36	2.45	5.19	3.32	14.30***
Others' social support from partner	29.23	4.89	34.04	3.73	32.93	4.72	30.19***
Others' relationship satisfaction	14.45	3.45	17.74	2.03	16.92	2.95	32.46***
Similarity to comparison target	16.55	7.59	28.48	6.78	21.77	7.80	54.47***
Relationship problems	3.76	2.23	4.05	2.30	5.04	3.05	7.75***
Social support from partner	35.15	3.53	35.82	3.20	32.85	4.82	15.01***
Perceived stability	79.25	22.35	83.99	17.50	65.71	29.19	14.89***
Relationship comparison level	40.22	19.73	42.16	19.10	32.70	24.93	5.30**
Relationship satisfaction	18.09	2.16	18.45	1.82	16.32	3.11	21.24***
Relationship together at follow-up	0.85	0.36	0.91	0.29	0.68	0.47	6.30**

†$p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

In order to determine if the effects of upward or downward comparisons interacted with study condition, a 3 (family member, friend, media portrayal) x 2 (upward comparison or not) x 2 (downward comparison or not) ANOVA was performed. No significant interactions were found, indicating that the effects of upward versus downward comparison did not differ as a function of the comparison target category assigned.

Hierarchical regressions were performed examining the effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, and assessments of the relationship (problems, social support, and perceived stability at the beginning of the study) on the outcome of relationship comparison level, and in turn, how comparison level affected perceptions of relationship satisfaction and stability at the study follow-up three months later. The regression analysis examining the outcome of relationship comparison level can be seen in Table 5. I first entered individual difference variables and media exposure variables. More committed relationship status and higher self-esteem and prior positive media exposure were positively associated with relationship comparison level. Gender was also predictive of comparison level, with women having higher relationship comparison levels than men. I next entered social comparison variables, including assessments of the target other's relationship, whether that comparison represented an upward/downward comparison, and similarity to comparison target. Self-esteem, prior positive media exposure, and gender all maintained their significance. Ratings of the target other's relationship stability and upward comparisons were negatively associated with comparison level, such that those who rated the target other's relationship as more stable and those who had made an upward comparison experienced a lower comparison level. Finally, I entered participants' own relationship characteristics of relationship problems, social support, and perceived stability. With the

Table 5. *Hierarchical regression examining effects of individual difference variables and social comparisons on the outcome of relationship comparison level.*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variable	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*
Constant		-14.86	13.29		-15.84	15.59		-73.46***	13.32
Gender[a]	-0.14*	-6.93*	2.78	-0.16**	-7.79**	2.75	-0.08*	-4.18*	2.02
Relationship status[b]	0.14*	5.83*	2.44	0.11	4.40†	2.44	-0.05	-1.85	1.88
Relationship duration	-0.07	-0.07	0.06	-0.07	-0.07	0.06	-0.09*	-0.09*	0.04
Parental divorce	-0.03	-1.40	3.11	-0.03	-1.88	3.08	0.01	0.19	2.24
Perceived divorce rate	-0.01	-0.02	0.10	0.01	0.02	0.09	0.07†	0.12†	0.07
Self-esteem	0.25***	1.25***	0.27	0.23***	1.15***	0.28	0.09*	0.45*	0.21
Social comparison orientation	-0.02	-0.17	0.53	-0.01	-0.04	0.53	0.03	0.32	0.38
Prior positive media exposure	0.15*	0.38*	0.16	0.14*	0.36*	0.16	0.06	0.14	0.12
Prior negative media exposure	-0.09	-0.32	0.21	-0.08	-0.27	0.21	-0.03	-0.09	0.15
Hours of TV per week	0.05	0.21	0.26	0.05	0.25	0.26	0.07†	0.32†	0.19
Others' relationship stability				-0.20*	-0.14*	0.02	-0.16*	-0.11**	0.04
Others' relationship problems				-0.07	-0.43	0.43	-0.05	-0.29	0.33
Others' social support from partner				0.01	0.04	0.42	0.01	0.04	0.30
Others' relationship satisfaction				0.01	-0.05	0.40	0.08	0.55	0.50
Upward versus downward comparison				-0.15*	-3.80*	1.48	0.06	1.40	1.12
Similarity to comparison target				0.24***	0.61***	0.18	0.03	0.08	0.13
Condition: Family				0.08	3.59	3.28	0.01	0.60	2.42
Condition: Media				0.01	0.04	2.97	-0.04	-1.68	2.17
Relationship problems							-0.14**	-1.18**	0.42
Social support from partner							0.40***	2.09***	0.29
Perceived stability							0.33***	0.29***	0.05
Model fit									
R^2		0.13			0.20			0.59	
Δ R2					0.07**			0.39***	

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

addition of these variables, women still tended to have higher comparison levels, as did those with higher self-esteem. Interestingly, perceived divorce rate as well as hours of TV per week were each marginally positively significant predictors of comparison level. Ratings of the target other's relationship stability continued to be negatively associated with comparison level, although upward/downward comparison and similarity to comparison target did not maintain significance. The strongest predictors of relationship comparison level, as one might expect, were characteristics of one's own relationship, with those with fewer relationship problems, and higher social support and perceived stability experiencing the highest relationship comparison levels.

Table 6 shows the results of hierarchical regressions on the outcome of relationship satisfaction. This allowed me to determine if social comparisons were significant predictors of relationship satisfaction when controlling for other factors. Additionally, it helped me to determine if the other pre-existing factors, including media exposure and self-esteem, predicted relationship satisfaction independently of social comparison. The individual difference variables of perceived similarity to comparison target, gender, prior positive and negative media exposure, and social comparison orientation were tested as moderators of the relationship between assessments of the comparison target and perceptions of one's own relationship. This was accomplished by creating interaction terms in the regression equations. With the stepwise addition of each new set of variables in this set of hierarchical regressions (totaling five models), a significant increase in R^2 was found for all models except the final one adding tests of interactions.

Model 1 first entered individual difference variables, demographics, and media exposure variables. Those in more committed relationships, those with higher self-esteem,

Table 6. *Hierarchical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, and relationship comparison level on the outcome of relationship satisfaction.*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Variable	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*
Constant		12.68	1.60		11.45***	1.80		4.69***	1.23		6.22***	1.27
Gender[a]	-0.10†	-0.58	0.34	-0.10†	-0.61†	0.32	-0.03	-0.19	0.19	-0.02	-0.10	0.18
Relationship status[b]	0.28***	1.41***	0.29	-0.22***	1.10***	0.28	0.03	0.13	0.17	0.04	0.17	0.17
Relationship duration	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Parental divorce	-0.02	-0.10	0.38	-0.04	-0.28	0.35	-0.01	-0.05	0.21	-0.01	-0.05	0.20
Perceived divorce rate	-0.11†	-0.02†	0.01	-0.08	-0.02	0.01	-0.15	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.01
Self-esteem	0.15**	0.09**	0.03	0.13*	0.08*	0.03	-0.01	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.01	0.02
Social comparison orientation	-0.06	-0.07	0.06	-0.04	-0.05	0.06	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.02	-0.02	0.04
Prior positive media exposure	0.15*	0.05*	0.02	0.15*	0.04*	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.01
Prior negative media exposure	-0.07	-0.03	0.03	-0.06	-0.03	0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Hours of TV per week	-0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.02
Others' relationship stability				-0.14†	-0.01†	0.01	-0.12*	-0.01*	0.01	-0.09*	-0.01*	0.01
Others' relationship problems				0.06	0.05	0.05	0.09*	0.07*	0.03	0.10*	0.08*	0.03
Others' social support from partner				-0.03	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	-0.01	0.03	-0.03	-0.01	0.03
Others' relationship satisfaction				0.04	0.03	0.08	0.13*	0.11*	0.05	0.12*	0.10*	0.05
Upward/downward comparison				-0.30***	-0.92***	0.17	-0.07*	-0.21*	0.10	-0.08*	-0.24*	0.10
Similarity to comparison target				0.31***	0.10***	0.02	0.07†	0.02†	0.01	0.07†	0.02†	0.01
Condition: Family				0.11	0.61	0.38	0.06	0.32	0.22	0.05	0.31	0.22
Condition: Media				0.04	0.21	0.34	0.01	0.05	0.20	0.02	0.09	0.20
Relationship problems							-0.15***	-0.15***	0.04	-0.13***	-0.13***	0.04
Social support from partner							0.36***	0.23***	0.03	0.29***	0.18***	0.03
Perceived stability							0.47***	0.05***	0.01	0.41***	0.04***	0.01
Relationship comparison level										0.17***	0.02***	0.01

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 6. *Hierarchical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, and relationship comparison level on the outcome of relationship satisfaction, cont.*

Variable		Model 5	
	β	*B*	*SE B*
Constant		8.78**	2.93
Gender[a]	-0.02	-0.13	0.19
Relationship status[b]	0.04	0.19	0.17
Relationship duration	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
Parental divorce	-0.01	-0.01	0.21
Perceived divorce rate	-0.02	-0.01	0.01
Self-esteem	-0.02	-0.01	0.02
Social comparison orientation	-0.02	-0.02	0.04
Prior positive media exposure	0.14*	0.04*	0.02
Prior negative media exposure	-0.02	-0.01	0.02
Hours of TV per week	0.03	0.02	0.02
Others' relationship stability	-0.16*	-0.01*	0.01
Others' relationship problems	-0.15	-0.11	0.15
Others' social support from partner	-0.12	-0.06	0.05
Others' relationship satisfaction	0.08	0.07	0.06
Upward/downward comparison	-0.08*	-0.24*	0.10
Similarity to comparison target	0.08†	0.02†	0.01
Relationship problems	-0.12**	-0.12**	0.04
Social support from partner	0.28***	0.18***	0.03
Perceived stability	0.40***	0.04***	0.01
Relationship comparison level	0.18***	0.02***	0.01

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 6, *Hierarchical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, and relationship comparison level on the outcome of relationship satisfaction, cont.*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5 β	Model 5 *B*	Model 5 *SE B*
Positive media x Family condition					-0.25†	-0.05	0.03
Positive media x Media condition					-0.20	-0.04	0.03
Negative media x Family condition					0.11	0.03	0.04
Negative media x Media condition					0.00	0.00	0.03
Social comparison orientation x Others' positive relationship quality					-0.04	-0.02	0.05
Social comparison orientation x Others' negative relationship quality					0.02	0.01	0.05
Similarity to target x Others' positive relationship quality					0.16*	0.02	0.01
Similarity to target x Others' negative relationship quality					0.12	0.02	0.12
Gender x Others' positive relationship quality					0.01	0.02	0.26
Gender x Others' negative relationship quality					0.01	0.05	0.23
Family condition x Others' positive relationship quality					-0.01	-0.05	0.34
Family condition x Others' negative relationship quality					0.02	0.10	0.27
Media condition x Others' positive relationship quality					0.06	0.31	0.28
Media condition x Others' negative relationship quality					0.12†	0.52	0.28
Model fit							
R^2	0.14	0.28	0.76	0.77	0.78		
ΔR^2		0.14***	0.48***	0.01***	0.01		

†$p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

and those with more prior positive media exposure had higher relationship satisfaction. Model 2 next entered social comparison variables including assessments of the target other's relationship, whether that comparison was upward/downward, and similarity to comparison target. All variables in the previous step retained significance. Additionally, those who made a downward comparison and those who rated the comparison target's relationship as more similar to their own experienced higher relationship satisfaction. Model 3 next entered participants' own relationship characteristics. Although many of the previously discussed predictors lost significance, others' relationship stability was found to be a significant negative predictor of relationship satisfaction, while others' relationship problems and satisfaction were both positively associated with one's own relationship satisfaction. As would be expected, those with fewer relationship problems, higher social support from partner, and higher perceived stability had higher relationship satisfaction. Model 4 next entered relationship comparison level which was positively associated with relationship satisfaction even when controlling for all other variables. Finally, Model 5 entered the aforementioned interactions, only one of which was significant. Upon calculating the slopes for persons who were +/- 1 standard deviation from the mean on similarity, it was determined that participants who perceived themselves to be more dissimilar (-1 standard deviation) from the comparison target saw their relationship satisfaction more negatively impacted by the comparison other's positive relationship quality than did those who believed their relationships to be more similar (+1 standard deviation) to the positive qualities of the comparison relationship (slopes of -0.31 versus 0.01, respectively).

Finally, in order to determine if the social comparisons people made had an effect on the relative long-term stability of their relationships, I performed hierarchical logistic

regressions (as can be seen in Table 7) examining the effect of comparison and other individual difference and relationship variables on whether or not the relationship was still together three to four months later (at the end of the semester). I first entered individual difference variables and media exposure variables. Those in more committed relationships were more likely to still be together at the study follow-up. Interestingly, participants perceiving a higher overall divorce rate tended to be more likely to have broken up by the follow-up. Next, I entered social comparison variables including assessments of the target other's relationship, whether the comparison was upward/downward, and similarity to comparison target. Variables significant in the previous step retained only marginal significance. Those who had made an upward comparison at the beginning of the study were more likely to have broken up than were those who had made a downward comparison. Additionally, those who believed their own relationships to be more similar to the comparison target's tended to have more stability than those that believed the comparison target's relationship to be more dissimilar to their own. I next entered participants' own relationship characteristics. The only significant predictor of stability at follow-up was fewer relationship problems. With the stepwise addition of relationship comparison level, the only significant predictors of stability at follow-up were fewer relationship problems and perceived stability at the beginning of the study. The next step in this series included relationship satisfaction at the beginning of the study. As predicted, relationship satisfaction had a strong impact on relationship stability at the study follow-up, although similarity to comparison target and relationship characteristics of social support and relationship problems continued to be important as well. In the final step, I added the same two-way interactions discussed above in order to examine potential moderating effects. With these interactions in

Table 7. *Logistical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, relationship comparison level, and relationship satisfaction on the outcome of relationship stability at three-month study follow-up*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio
Constant	-1.36	2.20	0.26	0.70	2.82	2.01	1.33	3.56	3.76
Gender[a]	0.08	0.44	1.08	-0.03	0.47	0.97	0.18	0.54	1.19
Relationship status[b]	1.35**	0.47	3.85	0.80[†]	0.46	2.22	0.66	0.50	1.93
Relationship duration	0.00	0.01	1.00	-0.01	0.01	1.00	-0.01	0.01	1.00
Parental divorce	-0.18	0.46	0.83	-0.08	0.49	0.92	-0.07	0.55	0.93
Perceived divorce rate	-0.04*	0.02	0.96	-0.03	0.02	0.97	-0.04[†]	0.02	0.96
Self-esteem	0.04	0.04	1.04	0.04	0.05	1.04	0.02	0.06	1.02
Social comparison orientation	0.05	0.08	1.05	0.08	0.09	1.09	0.12	0.10	1.13
Prior positive media exposure	0.01	0.03	1.01	0.02	0.03	1.02	0.01	0.03	1.01
Prior negative media exposure	-0.01	0.03	0.99	0.01	0.04	1.01	0.02	0.04	1.02
Hours of TV per week	0.03	0.04	1.03	0.04	0.05	1.04	0.06	0.06	1.07
Others' relationship stability				-0.01	0.01	1.00	-0.01	0.01	0.99
Others' relationship problems				-0.11	0.08	0.89	-0.03	0.09	0.97
Others' social support from partner				0.04	0.08	1.04	0.13	0.09	1.14
Others' relationship satisfaction				-0.29*	0.13	0.75	-0.33*	0.15	0.72
Upward versus downward comparison				-0.53*	0.26	0.59	-0.08	0.31	0.92
Similarity to comparison target				0.10***	0.03	1.10	0.08*	0.04	1.08
Condition: Family				0.48	0.57	1.62	0.43	0.66	1.54
Condition: Media				0.18	0.52	1.20	0.06	0.59	1.06
Relationship problems							-0.35***	0.11	0.70
Social support from partner							-0.05	0.07	0.96
Perceived stability							0.01[†]	0.01	1.01

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 7. *Logistical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, relationship comparison level, and relationship satisfaction on the outcome of relationship stability at three-month study follow-up, cont.*

	Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio	*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio
Constant	0.27	3.68	1.30	-5.01	4.25	0.01	18.51	15.84	0.00
Gender[a]	0.04	0.56	1.04	-0.21	0.61	0.82	-0.90	0.89	0.41
Relationship status[b]	0.61	0.51	1.84	0.66	0.51	1.94	0.91	0.62	2.48
Relationship duration	-0.01	0.01	1.00	-0.01	0.01	1.00	-0.01	0.01	0.99
Parental divorce	-0.06	0.55	0.95	0.29	0.63	1.33	0.68	0.80	1.98
Perceived divorce rate	-0.04†	0.02	0.96	-0.03	0.03	0.97	-0.05	0.03	0.95
Self-esteem	0.03	0.06	1.03	0.05	0.06	1.06	0.06	0.09	1.06
Social comparison orientation	0.13	0.10	1.14	0.18†	0.11	1.20	0.13	0.14	1.14
Prior positive media exposure	0.01	0.03	1.01	-0.01	0.03	1.00	0.16†	0.09	1.17
Prior negative media exposure	0.03	0.04	1.03	0.06	0.05	1.06	-0.17	0.14	0.84
Hours of TV per week	0.07	0.06	1.08	0.09	0.06	1.10	0.09	0.08	1.10
Others' relationship stability	-0.01	0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.01	0.99	-0.06t	0.03	0.94
Others' relationship problems	-0.05	0.10	0.95	-0.16	0.11	0.85	-0.72	0.76	0.49
Others' social support from partner	0.13	0.09	1.14	0.20*	0.10	1.22	-0.06	0.23	0.94
Others' relationship satisfaction	-0.34*	0.15	0.71	-0.57***	0.17	0.57	-1.12***	0.34	0.33
Upward versus downward comparison	-0.04	0.31	0.96	0.02	0.33	1.02	0.21	0.42	0.24
Similarity to comparison target	0.08*	0.04	1.09	0.09*	0.04	1.09	0.16**	0.06	1.17
Condition: Family	0.54	0.68	1.72	0.75	0.73	2.12	-2.62	3.18	0.07
Condition: Media	0.08	0.59	1.08	0.26	0.63	1.29	3.33	3.08	27.97
Relationship problems	-0.38***	0.11	0.69	-0.30*	0.13	0.74	-0.44*	0.17	0.64
Social support from partner	-0.01	0.08	1.00	-0.18†	0.10	0.84	-0.24†	0.14	0.79
Perceived stability	0.01*	0.01	1.01	0.01	0.01	1.00	0.01	0.01	1.01
Relationship comparison level	-0.02	0.02	0.98	-0.05*	0.02	0.96	-0.05*	0.03	0.95
Relationship satisfaction				0.45***	0.13	1.57	0.54**	0.18	1.72

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 7, *Logistical regression examining effects of individual difference variables, social comparisons, relationship comparison level, and relationship satisfaction on the outcome of relationship stability at three-month study follow-up, cont.*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6		
Variable						*B*	*SE B*	Odds Ratio
Positive media x Family condition						-0.11	0.11	0.90
Positive media x Media condition						-0.28*	0.11	0.75
Negative media x Family condition						0.35†	0.18	1.42
Negative media x Media condition						0.25	0.16	1.29
Social comparison orientation x Others' positive relationship quality						0.61*	0.24	1.83
Social comparison orientation x Others' negative relationship quality						0.20	0.23	1.22
Similarity to target x Others' positive relationship quality						-0.04	0.08	0.96
Similarity to target x Others' negative relationship quality						0.05	0.07	1.05
Gender x Others' positive relationship quality						0.08	1.22	1.08
Gender x Others' negative relationship quality						-1.16	1.13	0.31
Family condition x Others' positive relationship quality						0.35	1.60	1.42
Family condition x Others' negative relationship quality						-0.30	1.11	0.74
Media condition x Others' positive relationship quality						-2.61	1.63	0.07
Media condition x Others' negative relationship quality						-1.49	1.27	0.23
Model fit								
χ^2	16.63†	36.08**	61.97***	63.27***	78.35***	107.64***		

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

the regression equation, two significant moderating effects emerged. Firstly, prior positive media exposure interacted with being in the media portrayal study condition. Calculation of slopes revealed that participants in the media portrayal condition who had had more prior positive media exposure experienced more detrimental effects on stability than those who were in either of the other two conditions (slopes of -2.27 versus 3.94, respectively). This indicates that participants were more likely to break up if, when in the media portrayal condition, they focused on the idealistic images that were representative of their high levels of prior positive relationship media exposure. Another significant interaction emerged between social comparison orientation and others' positive relationship quality. Those who were higher on social comparison orientation had relationships that were more positively affected by the positive relationship characteristics of others than were those who were lower on social comparison orientation (slopes of 0.301 versus -3.53, respectively).

Given that the previous regressions included so many controls, I elected to complete regression series looking just at the effects of upward comparisons, downward comparisons, perceived similarity to comparison target, and the ways in which each of these factors could potentially interact with perceptions of others' positive and negative relationship quality. I first specifically examined if upward versus downward comparison and perceived similarity interacted with perceptions of support in the comparison other's relationship impacted relationship comparison level, satisfaction, and stability at follow-up. Perceived similarity emerged as the sole significant predictor of all three of these outcomes. In all analyses, those who perceived themselves to be highly similar to positive targets experienced better relationship quality and stability than those who contrasted themselves away from positive targets. Looking at how upward versus downward comparison and perceived similarity

interacted with negative attributes of the comparison target's relationship, similarity again emerged as the most important predictor of relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, and stability at follow-up. In these analyses, however, those who perceived their relationships to be similar to a negative comparison target experienced lower relationship comparison level and satisfaction. No moderating effect of similarity emerged for stability.

CHAPTER 6: STUDY 1 DISCUSSION

In Study 1, I sought to explore how social comparisons to family members, friends, and media portrayals impact relationship quality and stability. First addressing my primary hypotheses of social comparison in the current study, downward comparison theory (Wills, 1981) posits that people will tend to choose comparison targets that are doing worse than themselves in the domain of interest because this downward comparison makes them feel better about their own outcomes because they are doing better. In line with these ideas, I hypothesized that participants would tend towards downward comparisons with the relationships of family members, friends, and familiar media portrayals. This hypothesis was not supported, with roughly equal numbers of participants reporting that the relationship with which they had compared was better or worse than their own. There are a number of reasons why this may have been the case. Firstly, participants who had been assigned to assess the relationship of either a family member or friend did not have a wide array of choices in their comparison target. Those assigned to assess a family member's relationship, for instance, had to assess the relationship of one or both of their parents, if either was in a romantic relationship. Another explanation for this null finding rests in work on the third-person effect. In previous research, although people tend to believe that others are more susceptible to negative outcomes than themselves, it has been found that negative assessments of others' outcomes are diminished when we are evaluating close, specific others (Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), such as family members or friends. In further support of this idea, participants in the current study who were assigned to assess a familiar media portrayal of a relationship did in fact have a greater tendency to choose downward comparison targets. People do not have close personal ties to fictional media depictions, and therefore perhaps these media portrayals

can serve as a guilt-free negative target to bolster people's perceptions of their own relationship outcomes.

In reference to the categories of comparison targets to which participants were assigned to assess (and in turn, socially compare with), no specific hypotheses were made as to which category (i.e., family member, friend, or media portrayal) would have the most impact on relationship quality and stability because previous research has pointed to the potential of an important impact by each (e.g., Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995; Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001; Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996). Assessments of participants' own relationships (relationship problems, social support from partner, perceived stability, relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability at follow-up) did not differ significantly across the three conditions, indicating that no one category has notably higher impact on perceptions of one's own relationship. However, participants did tend to rate the relationship characteristics in each category somewhat differently. Close family members tended to be rated higher on stability, social support, and relationship satisfaction than were friends or media portrayals. As discussed above, downward comparisons were more frequently chosen for participants assigned to assess a familiar media portrayal relationship.

Following from downward comparison theory (Wills, 1981) and the idea that downward comparisons have a bolstering effect on perceptions of one's own outcomes, I hypothesized that participants who had made downward comparisons would report higher relationship satisfaction and stability than participants who had compared to an upward target, and conversely, that those who had made an upward comparison would rate their own relationship more negatively. This prediction was confirmed. Participants who compared

with a downward target reported fewer relationship problems, higher social support from partner, perceived stability, relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, and were more likely to still be together at the study follow-up. Further insight was gained with the incorporation of a third category which allowed participants to say that the relationship with which they had compared was approximately the same as their own. With the inclusion of this category, it was possible to determine whether the crucial impact came from the bolstering effect of downward comparisons or the detrimental effect of upward comparisons. In several relationship outcomes, choosing a downward comparison target did not result in markedly different relationship perceptions than did comparing with a target relationship that was approximately the same as one's own. Instead, the data supported a detrimental effect of upward comparisons, with participants comparing to upward targets indicating significantly lower relationship characteristics and outcomes than those who compared with a downward or similar target. These results indicate that greater impact lays in the negative effect of focusing on a target that is doing better than oneself rather than any bolstering effect of focusing on a downward target. Not only did participants who focused on an upward target have less positive perceptions of their relationship at the beginning of the study, but these tendencies were associated with a significantly higher rate of break-up by the study follow-up than was the case for participants who had chosen a downward or similar target. It is important to note, however, how pre-existing relationship characteristics may limit the pool of upward or downward comparison targets. Participants who had decidedly poor relationships would naturally have more possible comparison targets with better relationships than would participants who already had an excellent relationship (and thus, significantly fewer to choose from in the upper echelons). It is also important to note that although choice

of upward versus downward comparison target was predictive of break-up, it is likely that initial dissatisfaction with the relationship, and not the act of forcing a social comparison in the context of the current study, resulted in the higher rates of break-up of those who had made an upward comparison. Future research may consider manipulating whether participants socially compare to an upward versus downward or similar target in order to better examine the causal effects of such comparisons.

It has been well-established that people with lower self-esteem tend more towards downward comparisons because of their ability to make one feel better (Wills, 1981). I hypothesized that self-esteem would predict the choice of either an upward or downward comparison target. This hypothesis was not supported, although correlations revealed that participants with higher self-esteem did tend to rate the comparison target's relationship more positively than those with lower self-esteem.

The proposed impact of social comparisons was hypothesized to be greatest on relationship comparison level, or comparative status, which should then impact perceived relationship satisfaction, and in turn, stability. A number of regression models were examined to test the validity of this prediction. Although several social comparison variables impacted comparison level in simplistic models, when participants' own relationship characteristics (social support, problems, and perceived stability) were included in the model, the only social comparison variable to predict comparison level was the perceived stability of the comparison target relationship. Those who perceived greater stability in the target relationship experienced a lower relationship comparison level than those who perceived lower stability in the target relationship. The next step looked at the effect of social comparison variables and participants' relationship characteristics and comparison level on

relationship satisfaction. Even with participants' own relationship variables included in the equation, several social comparison variables continued to have a significant impact. Participants who had assessed the target relationship as being more problem stricken and representing a downward comparison had higher relationship satisfaction than those who had made an upward comparison. As predicted, relationship comparison level had a significant impact on relationship satisfaction, even when controlling for other variables. When examining the impact of social comparisons and assessments of one's own relationship quality on relationship stability at the study follow-up approximately three months later, social comparisons continued to act as significant predictors. Participants who had made upward comparisons were more likely to see their relationships dissolve before the follow-up, even when controlling for all other study variables.

I hypothesized that several moderators, including similarity to comparison target, gender, prior media exposure, and social comparison orientation would impact the effect of social comparisons on relationship satisfaction and resulting stability. Firstly, I hypothesized that similarity to comparison target would moderate the association of social comparison on resulting perceptions of participants' own relationships. This prediction followed from previous research indicating that taking an assimilative stance towards upwards comparison targets is less detrimental to self-perceptions than when a contrastive stance is taken (Smith, 2000). Similarity emerged as a moderator of relationship satisfaction, with those who contrasted their own relationships away from the high standards of a positive relationship comparison target experiencing lower relationship quality than those who did not believe their relationships to be very dissimilar to the comparison target. Similarity did not emerge as a moderator on stability at study follow-up.

Following from work by Benenson and Benarroch (1998) that showed that females tend to be more troubled by others' relationship successes than males are, I hypothesized a moderating effect of gender on the variables of interest. No moderating effect of gender was found for the outcomes of relationship satisfaction or stability at the study follow-up.

I also hypothesized that high levels of prior positive and negative relationship media exposure would influence relationship satisfaction and stability in addition to serving as moderator of the effects of social comparison on relationship satisfaction and stability. These predictions follow from cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996) and script theory (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004, Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) ideas that higher levels of media exposure result in more deeply ingrained relationship expectations. Having assessed the perceived positive and negative relationship messages of participants' favorite movies and television shows, I first examined how these preferences impacted relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, and stability. Correlational analyses revealed that participants with more prior positive relationship media exposure tended to have a higher relationship comparison level than those who had not had as much exposure to positive relationship ideals in the media. Participants who had had more prior negative relationship media exposure reported more problems in their own relationships. Both of these correlational findings could be interpreted in numerous ways. Perhaps participants who already have a happier relationship are drawn to happier relationship portrayals in the media, and conversely, those who already have problem-stricken relationships may be more comfortable watching media portrayals that are of worse quality than their own relationships, potentially for downward comparison relationship quality bolstering effects. It is also possible that the media exposure helped to

shape the perceived outcomes of participants' relationships, with those exposed to more positive media setting higher standards for their own relationships and working to meet these high standards in line with the ideals portrayed in the media. Regression analyses that controlled for numerous other factors revealed mixed results for prior media exposure. In models examining the outcomes of relationship comparison level and relationship satisfaction, prior positive media exposure was positively predictive, although not in more complex models controlling for participants' relationship characteristics. Prior positive relationship media exposure was not a significant predictor of relationship stability at follow-up and prior negative relationship media exposure did not appear to impact any of the relationship outcomes examined. I also examined the moderating effects of prior positive and negative media exposure on relationship satisfaction and stability. Although there was no significant interaction found on relationship satisfaction, participants in the media portrayal condition who had had high levels of prior positive relationship media exposure were more likely to break up than were participants who had not been forced to compare their relationship to the upward and idealistic standards they were used to in the media.

Finally, I hypothesized that social comparison orientation (SCO) would moderate the effect of social comparisons on relationship outcomes following from research by Buunk (2006) indicating that those with a higher tendency to socially compare tend to be more impacted by exposure to comparison targets. Although no moderating effect was observed for the outcome of relationship satisfaction, social comparison orientation did moderate the effects of the social comparison on stability at follow-up, with participants who had higher social comparison orientations more likely to see their stability positively impacted by the positive relationship qualities of others. This contrasts with downward comparison theory

(Wills, 1981), which would lead one to believe that focusing on the positive relationship characteristics of others should threaten one's own relationship.

Turning lastly to parental divorce and perceptions of the divorce rate, previous research has indicated that children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce in adulthood (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Tallman, Rotolo, & Gray, 2001) and despite the leveling off of divorce in recent years, society tends to overestimate the current rate of divorce and believe that divorce is on the rise (Crary, 2007). These false beliefs, following from self-fulfilling prophecy research (Madon et al., 2003; Rosenthal, 2003), may be leading to their own fulfillment, with people believing that relationships are doomed to fail and in turn not committing the effort necessary to remedy relationship issues as they arise. In line with these ideas, I examined how parental divorce and perceptions of the overall divorce rate were associated with relationship outcomes of relationship comparison level, satisfaction, and stability. Simple correlations revealed that participants whose parents had divorced perceived a higher overall divorce rate. Those who perceived a higher overall divorce rate tended to have lower perceived stability at the beginning of the study as well as a higher likelihood of having broken up by the study follow-up approximately three months later. Although regressions examining outcomes of relationship comparison level and relationship satisfaction did not show a significant impact of parental divorce or perceived overall divorce rate, models that controlled for numerous other variables, including relationship characteristics, indicated that those who perceived a higher overall divorce rate were more likely to have broken up by the study follow-up. This finding supports my assertion of a self-fulfilling prophecy effect of relationship instability.

CHAPTER 7: STUDY 2 METHOD

In order to determine the effects of positive versus negative media portrayals on perceptions of peoples' relationships, an experiment was performed. It was previously determined that a minimum of 52 participants would be run in each of the three conditions (exposure to positive portrayals, exposure to negative portrayals, control group not exposed to movie clips), yielding an *N* of at least 156. This number was determined by consulting Cohen's (1992) work on power, which prescribes a minimum of 52 participants per group in order to achieve power of .80 for a medium effect size (*d* of .25 or higher) with $p < .05$ for an ANOVA examining differences between groups. Participants ($N = 233$) were recruited through undergraduate psychology courses where credit was given for research participation. Twelve participants had to be dropped from the analyses because they skipped critical non-scale (single) items that could not be reasonably extrapolated, such as perceptions of relationship stability, resulting in a final *N* of 221, 138 of whom were female, and 83 of whom were male. A current romantic relationship was a prerequisite for participation in Study 2 (but not in the pre-testing study, described below). Relationship status of participants included 32 dating casually, 169 dating seriously, 15 engaged, and 5 married. In the end, I collected data from 68 participants in the positive media portrayal condition, 76 in the negative media portrayal condition, and 77 in the control condition that did not view and evaluate any movie clips. It was believed that the positive and idealistic media portrayals would result in a forced upward relationship social comparison whereas the negative and cynical media portrayals would allow for a downward relationship social comparison. All participants were randomly assigned to condition by session. Participants received one research credit in exchange for their participation.

Pre-Testing of Stimuli

In order to demonstrate that the movie clips chosen for Study 2 that were intended to portray positive relationships were perceived as positive and those that were intended to portray negative relationships were perceived as negative, a pre-test of stimuli was performed. Feedback was elicited from colleagues in social psychology (via the Society for Personality and Social Psychology listserv) on ideas for movies depicting either a positive or negative portrayal of relationships. Based on this feedback, I chose five movies that offered positive and idealistic clips (*Love Story, Somewhere in Time, The Notebook, Sleepless in Seattle,* and *What Dreams May Come*) and five movies that offered negative or cynical clips (*Annie Hall, Closer, The Break-Up, The Money Pit,* and *War of the Roses*). The positive relationship clips carried messages of love at first sight, belief in soul mates, conflict-free life-long relationships, and intense romance. The negative relationship clips carried messages of bitterness, conflict, disrespect, infidelity, belligerence, and the idea that relationships are doomed to fail.

In the pre-test study, 355 participants were randomly assigned by session to watch either two of the positive relationship clips or two of the negative relationship clips, the order of which was also randomized. After watching each clip, they were asked to complete a brief movie clip evaluation form which assessed the relationship happiness of the couple in the clip, positivity of the relationship, negativity of the relationship, and positive and negative emotional intensity of the interaction. Based on results of this study, I determined which two positive clips and which two negative clips best captured positive and negative relationships. Efforts were also made to choose clips that were equated on absolute value of relationship

quality and emotional intensity. Analyses of pre-test data are discussed in the Results section. The resulting selection of movie clips was used in Study 2.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to participate in a Media Portrayals of Relationships study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: exposure to positive media portrayals of relationships, exposure to negative media portrayals of relationships, or a control group that was not asked to view movie clips. Participants were first asked to disclose their current relationship status and duration in an identical fashion to Study 1 and then completed an initial assessment of relationship satisfaction. Participants assigned to either of the media conditions were asked to watch both of the movie clips for that condition (i.e., participants assigned to the positive portrayals condition watched both of the positive clips determined by the pre-testing study).

After each clip, participants rated the clip on dimensions identical to those used in the pre-test study (relationship quality, positivity, negativity, intensity of emotions, and realism). After viewing and evaluating the movie clips, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their media exposure and self-esteem.

The next part of the study involved assessing the participants' own perceived relationship quality and stability as well as their social comparison orientation. In order to avoid demand characteristics, participants were led to believe that the questionnaire they completed at this point had nothing to do with the Media Portrayals of Relationships study. They were told that one of the undergraduate research assistants in the laboratory was collecting data for their honors thesis on relationships. Participants were asked if they would please complete this questionnaire study as well in a separate room down the hall under the

guise of having more privacy when completing the measures. The questionnaire assessing relationship quality and stability appeared in a different format and font in contrast to the earlier questionnaire. It also included a measure of social comparison orientation. Upon completion, participants were probed for suspicion and then were debriefed about the true purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions or express concerns before being dismissed.

Measures

Following the viewing of each movie clip, participants rated the relationship portrayed in the clip on the same dimensions used in the pre-test study for the purpose of manipulation check (relationship quality of the couple in the clip, positivity of the relationship, negativity of the relationship, positive and negative emotional intensity of the interaction, and whether or not they had seen the movie from which the clip was pulled). They also completed items assessing their belief that the relationship portrayed in the movie was better or worse than their own (an upward or downward comparison) and similarity of the relationship in the movie clip to their own relationship (using the same items described in Study 1). Media exposure, self-esteem, and social comparison orientation were then assessed identically to Study 1. In order to assess the participants' own perceived relationship characteristics, quality, and stability, they next filled out a questionnaire that, again, included the same measures for relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, social support, relationship problems, and perceived stability described in Study 1. Measures for Study 2 can be seen in Appendix B.

CHAPTER 8: STUDY 2 RESULTS

First addressing the pre-test of potential movie clips, 355 participants each evaluated two clips, both of which were either positive or negative in their portrayal of relationships. Table 8 summarizes the information gathered for each of the five positive clips and five negative clips, including participants' mean ratings of quality of the relationship portrayed, positivity, negativity, intensity of positive and negative emotions, realism, and whether they had seen the movie from which the clip was pulled. All of the variables were rated on a scale from 1 to 10.

Table 9 shows the results of independent samples *t*-tests comparing all the movie clip evaluations for participants in the positive versus negative movie clip conditions. As was hoped, participants in the negative movie clip condition rated the clips as lower on relationship quality, positivity, and intensity of positive emotions, and higher on negativity and intensity of negative emotions in comparison to participants in the positive movie clip condition. Interestingly, negative movie clips were rated as more realistic than were positive movie clips.

In order to determine which two positive clips and which two negative clips most appropriately equated absolute value of relationship quality and overall emotional intensity, two additional variables were formed. Table 10 shows the absolute value of relationship quality (calculated as distance from the pole of either 1 (extremely unhappy for negative clips) or 10 (extremely happy for positive clips) of the relationship portrayed) as well as the summed positive and negative emotional intensity of each clip. Based on these results and information on percentages of students that had been previously exposed to these movies, I chose *Closer* and *War of the Roses* for the Study 2 condition of negative movie portrayals

Table 8. *Pre-testing study descriptive results of evaluated positive and negative movie clips with ratings on scales from 1 to 10 (N = 355)*

Movie Clip	n	% who had seen	Quality *M(SD)*	Positivity *M(SD)*	Negativity *M(SD)*	Positive Intensity *M(SD)*	Negative Intensity *M(SD)*	Realism *M(SD)*
Negative Portrayals:								
Annie Hall	68	5	3.28(1.40)	4.31(2.01)	5.63(2.01)	4.12(1.92)	5.62(2.40)	5.56(2.08)
The Break-Up	82	76	2.33(1.19)	2.01(0.99)	8.27(1.55)	2.44(1.55)	8.67(1.21)	7.60(1.53)
Closer	97	20	2.36(1.40)	2.52(1.47)	7.46(2.06)	3.94(2.12)	7.77(1.83)	6.16(1.99)
The Money Pit	87	22	2.63(1.53)	2.54(1.30)	8.01(1.52)	4.09(2.54)	8.63(1.82)	5.71(1.99)
War of the Roses	77	5	1.60(0.85)	1.56(0.90)	8.99(1.45)	2.10(1.41)	8.92(1.22)	5.91(1.91)
Positive Portrayals:								
Love Story	93	5	9.18(1.08)	8.95(1.39)	1.75(1.24)	8.62(1.43)	1.81(1.39)	6.64(2.11)
The Notebook	36	72	9.19(0.79)	9.14(1.05)	1.56(0.84)	8.92(0.91)	1.72(1.06)	5.72(2.11)
Sleepless in Seattle	65	46	7.78(1.40)	7.71(1.65)	2.54(1.45)	7.55(1.90)	3.12(2.23)	4.38(2.04)
Somewhere in Time	49	0	8.10(1.29)	8.00(1.62)	1.30(1.30)	8.35(1.42)	2.50(1.62)	4.78(2.05)
What Dreams May Come	56	18	9.02(1.10)	8.95(1.07)	1.63(0.89)	8.43(1.17)	1.79(1.22)	6.82(2.12)

Table 9. *Independent samples t-tests examining differences for positive versus negative movie portrayals of relationships on evaluations (N = 355)*

	Positive Condition ($N = 299$)		Negative Condition ($N = 411$)		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*
Quality	8.67	1.31	2.42	1.40	-60.44***
Positivity	8.55	1.51	2.54	1.62	-50.30***
Negativity	1.97	1.25	7.73	2.03	43.36***
Positive intensity	8.34	1.51	3.36	2.15	-34.45***
Negative intensity	2.19	1.67	7.99	2.07	39.88***
Realism	5.77	2.31	6.20	2.03	2.68**
Seen movie	0.24	0.43	0.26	0.44	0.73

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

Table 10. *Absolute value of evaluated movie clip relationship quality and overall intensity of emotions (N = 355)*

Movie Clip	Absolute Value Relationship Quality *M(SD)*	Overall Emotional Intensity *M(SD)*
Negative Portrayals:		
Annie Hall	3.28(1.40)	9.74(2.83)
The Break-Up	2.33(1.19)	11.11(1.55)
Closer	2.36(1.40)	11.71(2.52)
The Money Pit	2.63(1.53)	12.72(2.65)
War of the Roses	1.60(0.85)	11.01(1.82)
Positive Portrayals:		
Love Story	0.82(1.08)	10.43(1.34)
The Notebook	0.81(0.79)	10.64(1.07)
Sleepless in Seattle	2.22(1.40)	10.68(2.40)
Somewhere in Time	1.90(1.29)	10.83(2.06)
What Dreams May Come	0.98(1.10)	10.21(1.55)

and *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Somewhere in Time* for the condition of positive movie portrayals because they were closest on absolute value of relationship quality while having been seen by smaller proportions of students (and thus would hopefully have fewer carry-over effects from previous viewings of the movie). More specifically, the absolute value of relationship quality for each negative clip was approximately equal to that of a positive clip (*Closer* ≈ *Sleepless in Seattle*; *War of the Roses* ≈ *Somewhere in Time*). In the pre-testing study, overall emotional intensity tended to be higher in the negative clips than the positive clips ($t(707) = 4.82$, $p < .001$).

Now turning to Study 2, descriptive statistics were computed on all of the movie clip evaluation (averaged across both positive or negative clips), media exposure, and relationship quality and stability variables of interest, as can be seen in Table 11. Reliability coefficient αs are also included for multi-item scales. In the negative media portrayal condition, 9.5% of participants had previously seen *Closer*, while 2.8% had seen *War of the Roses*. In the positive media portrayal condition, 38.8% had seen *Sleepless in Seattle*, while 0% had seen *Somewhere in Time*. For the purpose of manipulation check, I conducted independent samples *t*-tests, shown in Table 12, to verify that the positive and negative media portrayals were indeed interpreted that way by participants. As was the case in the pre-test study and consistent with my intentions, the positive clips were evaluated as depicting higher relationship quality, positivity, and intensity of positive emotions, while being lower on negativity, intensity of negative emotions, and (unintentionally) realism. It is notable that the absolute value of relationship quality and overall emotional intensity did not differ significantly for these two conditions, meaning they were relatively equal on these potential confounding factors. Of particular interest, although participants tended to rate the positive

Table 11. *Descriptive statistics for movie clip evaluation, media exposure, and relationship quality and stability variables of interest for Study 2 (N = 221)*

Variable	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	*α*
Relationship duration (in months)	0.75	120	16.58	16.37	
Initial Relationship satisfaction	9	20	17.57	2.53	.78
Positive portrayals:					
Quality	6	10	8.54	0.97	
Positivity	6.5	10	8.64	0.97	
Negativity	1	4	1.94	0.76	
Positive intensity	6.5	10	8.79	0.98	
Negative intensity	1	9	2.65	1.85	
Overall emotional intensity	8.5	19	11.45	1.96	
Comparison to own relationship	-1	2	0.29	0.84	
Similarity to own relationship	1	9.5	4.79	1.97	
Negative Portrayals:					
Quality	1	9	2.13	1.36	
Positivity	1	9.5	2.02	1.40	
Negativity	2	10	8.52	1.56	
Positive intensity	1	10	3.27	1.98	
Negative intensity	1.5	10	8.56	1.45	

Table 11, *Descriptive statistics for movie clip evaluation, media exposure, and relationship quality and stability variables of interest for Study 2 (N = 221), cont.*

Variable	Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	*α*
Overall emotional intensity	7	20	11.83	1.79	
Comparison to own relationship	-2	2	-1.77	0.77	
Similarity to own relationship	1	5	1.58	0.92	
Prior positive relationship media exposure	4	54.7	27.99	9.01	
Prior negative relationship media exposure	2.83	38.3	19.70	7.30	
Hours per week watching TV/videos	0.06	28	8.65	4.67	
Self-esteem	17	40	33.10	4.36	.86
Social support	23	40	34.32	3.97	.82
Relationship problems	0	14	3.76	2.32	
Relationship comparison level	-15	96	40.32	22.60	.90
Relationship satisfaction following manipulation	6	20	17.43	2.92	.82
Perceived stability	0	100	71.95	28.65	
Social comparison orientation	2	11	7.84	2.20	.66

Table 12. *Independent samples t-tests comparing evaluations for positive versus negative media portrayals*

	Positive Portrayals ($N = 68$)		Negative Portrayals ($N = 75$)		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*
Quality	8.54	0.97	2.13	1.36	-32.14***
Absolute value relationship quality	1.90	1.04	2.13	1.36	1.16
Positivity	8.64	0.97	2.02	1.40	-32.58***
Negativity	1.94	0.76	8.52	1.56	31.56***
Positive intensity	8.79	0.98	3.27	1.98	-20.82***
Negative intensity	2.65	1.85	8.56	1.45	21.34***
Overall intensity	11.45	1.96	11.83	1.79	1.23
Realsim	4.59	1.84	5.83	1.80	4.06***
Movie comparison to own relationship	-0.29	0.84	-1.77	0.77	-15.24***
Movie similarity to own relationship	4.79	1.97	1.58	0.92	-12.70***

***$p < .001$.

media portrayals as significantly less realistic than the negative media portrayals, they tended to believe their own relationships were more similar to the positive portrayals than the negative portrayals and actually tended to believe their relationships were somewhat better than the idealistic movie portrayals.

Correlational analyses, shown in Table 13, were conducted in order to assess first-order relationships among the variables of interest. A number of interesting results emerged. Participants in more committed relationships, in addition to having higher relationship satisfaction, social support from partner, and perceived stability, tended to rate the relationship quality of the media portrayals lower than participants in less committed relationships. They also were more likely to believe the media relationships were worse than their own (across both positive and negative conditions). Women tended to have both more prior positive and more negative relationship media exposure from their favorite movies and television shows than men. The higher participants' prior positive relationship media exposure, the more negatively they tended to rate the relationship portrayed in the movie clips. Self-esteem was higher in males and those with higher relationship satisfaction. Additionally, persons with higher self-esteem tended to rate the move clips as less emotionally intense and were more likely to believe that their own relationships were better than those portrayed in the movie clips. As would be expected, relationship comparison level was higher in participants with higher relationship satisfaction and in those who evaluated the media portrayal relationship as being worse than their own. Social comparison orientation was significantly correlated with only one variable, relationship problems, meaning persons with greater tendencies to socially compare tended to report more relationship problems.

Table 13. *Correlations among relationship, media portrayal evaluation, and individual difference variables*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Gender[a]	--												
2. Relationship status[b]	-.07	--											
3. Relationship duration	.02	.45***	--										
4. Initial relationship satisfaction	.06	.39***	.22***	--									
5. Movie relationship quality	-.01	-.21*	-.06	-.16	--								
6. Movie positivity	.01	-.20*	-.06	-.17*	.98***	--							
7. Movie negativity	.00	.17*	.08	.20*	-.96***	-.97***	--						
8. Movie positive intensity	-.02	-.27***	-.08	-.18*	.89***	.91***	-.88***	--					
9. Movie negative intensity	-.02	.20*	.08	.11	-.91***	-.91***	.90***	-.84***	--				
10. Movie overall emotional intensity	-.18*	.20*	.09	-.11	-.12	-.10	.14	.18*	.38***	--			
11. Movie realism	-.07	-.10	.02	.17*	.16	.11	.13	-.01	-.01	-.06	--		
12. Movie comparison to own relationship	.04	-.26**	-.10	-.35***	.81***	.83***	-.80***	.76***	.76***	-.08	-.33***	--	
13. Movie similarity to own relationship	-.08	-.14	-.09	-.05	.71***	.71***	-.71***	.66***	-.71***	-.16	.05	.58***	--
14. Prior positive media exposure	-.22***	.03	-.08	.12	-.13	-.15	.17*	-.08	.16	.16	.15	-.14	-.11
15. Prior negative media exposure	-.20**	.01	-.15*	.02	-.06	-.07	.07	-.01	.07	.11	.08	-.07	.01
16. Hours of TV/videos per week	.10	-.02	-.02	.05	-.04	-.07	.06	-.01	.08	.13	.07	-.07	.01

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 13, *Correlations among relationship, media portrayal evaluation, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	14.	15.	16.
14. Prior positive media exposure	--		
15. Prior negative media exposure	.44***	--	
16. Hours of TV/videos per week	.33***	.19**	--

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 13, *Correlations among relationship, media portrayal evaluation, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
17. Self-esteem	.17*	.06	.07	.34***	-.11	-.13	.14	-.15	.04	-.18*	.07	-.18*	.04
18. Relationship social support	-.02	.21**	.13	.67***	-.08	-.10	.11	-.05	.06	.03	-.04	-.24**	-.01
19. Relationship problems	.05	.02	.03	-.44***	-.09	-.07	.06	-.04	.07	.06	.04	.04	-.07
20. Relationship comparison level	-.04	.13	.07	.62***	-.06	-.08	.11	-.08	.04	-.08	.03	-.23**	-.01
21. Relationship satisfaction following manipulation	.09	.32***	.19**	.90***	-.11	-.11	.15	-.11	.06	-.08	.07	-.29***	-.01
22. Perceived stability	.01	.50***	.29***	.77***	-.15	-.16	.18*	-.21*	.10	-.18*	.15	-.30***	.00
23. Social comparison orientation	-.01	-.05	-.10	-.10	-.04	-.03	.04	.01	-.04	-.06	.04	.08	-.06

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

Table 13, *Correlations among relationship, media portrayal evaluation, and individual difference variables, cont.*

Variable	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.	20.	21.	22.	23.
17. Self-esteem	.01	-.05	.07	--						
18. Relationship social support	-.01	-.04	.02	-.31***	--					
19. Relationship problems	-.13	-.01	.07	-.17*	-.47***	--				
20. Relationship comparison level	.12	.03	-.03	.18**	.71***	-.53***	--			
21. Relationship satisfaction following manipulation	.09	-.03	.09	.31***	.72***	-.47***	.68***	--		
22. Perceived stability	.14*	-.01	.09	.24***	.54***	-.34***	.59***	.75***	--	
23. Social comparison orientation	-.05	-.10	.01	-.09	-.11	.20**	-.10	-.09	-.08	--

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [a]Gender: 1 = *Male*, 0 = *Female*. [b]Relationship status: 1 = *Dating casually*, 2 = *Dating seriously*, 3 = *Engaged*, 4 = *Married*.

In order to determine how exposure to positive or negative movie clips influenced perceptions of relationship quality and stability in comparison to the control condition in which subjects were not exposed to movie clips, one-way ANOVAs were performed. This allowed me to determine if there were, in fact, differences among the three conditions in predicting perceived relationship quality and stability. No differences were found among the three conditions on relationship satisfaction following the manipulation ($F(2,218) = 1.34$, $p = .26$), social support from partner ($F(2,218) = .37$, $p = .69$), relationship problems ($F(2,218) = 1.64$, $p = .20$), or relationship comparison level ($F(2,218) = .75$, $p = .48$). A marginally significant effect was found on perceived relationship stability ($F(2,218) = 2.36$, $p < .10$). A post-hoc analysis using a Tukey test revealed that participants in the negative media portrayal condition ($M = 76.14$, $SD = 25.97$) had marginally ($p < .10$) significantly higher perceived stability than participants in the positive media portrayal condition ($M = 66.01$, $SD = 33.32$), perhaps indicating that the negative relationship media portrayal had a slight bolstering effect on one's own perceived relationship stability. However, when controlling for initial relationship satisfaction (prior to manipulation), this effect disappeared ($F(2,217) = 1.08$, $p = .34$). I also completed a one-way ANOVA to determine if any change in relationship satisfaction that occurred over the course of the study related to condition. The ANOVA was non-significant ($F(2,218) = 1.01$, $p = .37$), indicating that study condition did not differentially impact change in perceptions of relationship satisfaction.

Finally, as can be seen in Table 14, hierarchical regressions were performed to determine how the study variables influenced relationship satisfaction. Each model represented a significant increase in R^2, with the exception of Model 4, which added interactions. Model 1 examined individual difference variables and prior media exposure as

Table 14. *Hierarchical regression examining effects of study variables on relationship satisfaction.*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variable	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*
Constant		7.02**	2.33		0.85	4.09		-0.60	3.11
Gender	0.08	0.46	0.48	0.10	0.62	0.47	0.11*	0.66*	0.31
Relationship status	0.35***	2.05***	0.48	0.37***	2.11***	0.48	0.09	0.55	0.36
Relationship duration	0.09	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Self-esteem	0.21**	0.15**	0.05	0.12	0.08	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.04
Social comparison orientation	-0.05	-0.07	0.10	-0.03	-0.04	0.10	0.01	0.01	0.07
Prior positive media exposure	0.14	0.05	0.03	0.14	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.02
Prior negative media exposure	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.02
Hours of TV per week	0.02	0.01	0.05	-0.01	-0.01	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.03
Negative condition				0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Positive condition				-0.18	-1.08	1.44	-0.12	-0.72	0.95
Movie relationship quality				0.19	0.17	0.34	-0.01	-0.01	0.23
Movie positivity				0.79†	0.68†	0.39	0.54†	0.46†	0.27
Movie negativity				0.97**	0.83**	0.28	0.48*	0.42*	0.19
Movie positive intensity				0.06	0.06	0.17	0.07	0.07	0.11
Movie negative intensity				-0.30	-0.27	0.16	-0.10	-0.09	0.11
Movie realism				-0.11	-0.18	0.14	0.01	0.01	0.09
Movie comparison to own relationship				-0.47***	-1.09***	0.30	-0.15	-0.34	0.21
Movie similarity to own relationship				0.22†	0.31†	0.17	0.04	0.06	0.11
Social support from partner							0.30***	0.23***	0.06
Relationship problems							-0.09	-0.13	0.08
Perceived stability							0.39***	0.04***	0.01
Relationship comparison level							0.10	0.01	0.01

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 14, *Hierarchical regression examining effects of study variables on relationship satisfaction, cont.*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4		
				β	*B*	*SE B*
Constant					1.20	3.42
Gender				0.09	0.53	0.44
Relationship status				0.09	0.49	0.36
Relationship duration				0.04	0.01	0.01
Self-esteem				0.01	0.01	0.04
Social comparison orientation				0.02	0.02	0.09
Prior positive media exposure				0.05	0.02	0.02
Prior negative media exposure				0.07	0.03	0.03
Hours of TV per week				0.01	0.01	0.03
Negative condition				0.00	0.00	0.00
Positive condition				-0.34	-2.05	2.00
Movie relationship quality				0.02	0.02	0.22
Movie positivity				0.53†	0.46†	0.27
Movie negativity				0.38†	0.33†	0.20
Movie positive intensity				0.03	0.03	0.12
Movie negative intensity				-0.11	-0.10	0.11
Movie realism				-0.01	-0.01	0.09
Movie comparison to own relationship				-0.10	-0.24	0.21
Movie similarity to own relationship				0.19*	0.26*	0.13
Social support from partner				0.31***	0.24***	0.06
Relationship problems				-0.04	-0.06	0.09
Perceived stability				0.35***	0.04***	0.01
Relationship comparison level				0.08	0.01	0.01

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 14, *Hierarchical regression examining effects of study variables on relationship satisfaction, cont.*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4		
				β	*B*	*SE B*
Negative condition x Social comparison orientation				0.00	0.00	0.00
Negative condition x Positive media exposure				0.00	0.00	0.00
Negative condition x Negative media exposure				0.00	0.00	0.00
Negative condition x Similarity				-0.25*	-0.74*	0.29
Negative condition x Gender				0.00	0.00	0.00
Positive condition x Social comparison orientation				-0.07	-0.05	0.13
Positive condition x Positive media exposure				0.10	0.02	0.04
Positive condition x Negative media exposure				-0.30	-0.08	0.05
Positive condition x Similarity				0.00	0.00	0.00
Positive condition x Gender				0.05	0.39	0.60
Model fit						
R^2	0.27	0.41	0.76		0.77	
ΔR^2		0.14***	0.35***		0.02	

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predictors of relationship satisfaction, finding that participants in more committed relationships and those with higher self-esteem tended to have higher relationship satisfaction. Model 2 stepped in experimental manipulations, including condition and movie evaluations for participants in the positive and negative media portrayal conditions. The effect of self-esteem was lost, although relationship status remained significant. Evaluations of movie clip relationship negativity were positively associated with relationship satisfaction, as was the assessment that the media portrayal represented a worse relationship than one's own. Model 3 stepped in other assessments of the current relationship. Social support from partner and perceived stability were positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Model 4 stepped in interactions to examine if similarity to comparison target, gender, media exposure, and social comparison orientation served as moderators of the effect of condition on satisfaction. A significant interaction was found between the negative movie clip condition and perceived similarity to the relationship portrayed in the movie clips. Upon calculating the slopes, it was found that participants in the negative movie clip condition who perceived their relationships to be similar to those portrayed in the clips experienced lower relationship satisfaction that those in either the positive movie clip or control conditions (slope of -0.06 versus 0.44).

CHAPTER 9: STUDY 2 DISCUSSION

In Study 2, I sought to determine if a forced upward or downward comparison to media portrayals of relationships would affect perceptions of one's own relationship satisfaction. Wills' (1981) downward comparison theory posits that comparing with others who are doing worse makes people feel better about their outcomes because they are doing better than the comparison target. I hypothesized that participants assigned to a negative media portrayal condition, who viewed two movie clips depicting decidedly negative portrayals of relationship, would experience a downward comparison bolstering effect that would elevate their assessments of their own relationship quality. Conversely, I hypothesized that participants assigned to a positive media portrayal condition, who viewed two clips from positive and idealistic movies, would judge their own relationships more negatively because they would likely pale in comparison to the romantic ideal to which they were exposed. Unfortunately, the data did not support these primary hypotheses. There was not a significant difference in assessments of participants' relationships across the conditions of positive media portrayal, negative media portrayal, or control condition. However, it was found that participants who evaluated the movie clip relationships more negatively or lower in quality than their own relationships experienced higher relationship satisfaction that those who did not make these negative evaluations of the social comparison target. So, although the experimental manipulation of positive versus negative movie clips did not result in different ratings of one's own relationship, the tendency to view comparison relationships more negatively did result in a bolstering effect consistent with downward comparison theory. This demonstrates that perception of social comparison targets appears to be more important than objective reality.

Broemer and Diehl (2003), in their study examining interdependence theory, hypothesized that similarity to a comparison target should impact the effect that comparison has on perceptions of one's own relationship. In situations where we believe we are similar to a high standard, we should be more satisfied than when we feel we are dissimilar to the high standard. In line with these ideas, I hypothesized that similarity to the media portrayal relationships would moderate their effect on relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis was confirmed, such that participants in the negative movie clip condition who believed their relationships to be similar to the negative relationship portrayed tended to experience lower relationship satisfaction.

Cultivation theory posits that the more exposure one has to the media, the more one perceives media images as indicative of reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) because the same messages are given time and time again. Script theory looking at media influence posits that if we are exposed again and again to similar relationship themes in the media, we may adopt a perception that those portrayals represent reality (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). In turn, those media portrayals of relationships may shape our perceptions of our own relationships. Following from these ideas, I had hypothesized that prior relationship media exposure would moderate the effect of the movie clips on perceptions of relationship satisfaction. However, no moderating effect emerged in the analyses.

Following from the work of Gibbons and Buunk (Buunk, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) that established the importance of social comparison orientation and its moderating effects on assessments of one's own outcomes, I hypothesized that social comparison orientation would serve to moderate the association between media portrayal condition and

satisfaction. The data failed to support this hypothesis. The social comparison orientation measure failed to serve as an important variable in any of the analyses in Study 2, despite being a well-established valid measure. It is interesting to note that social comparison orientation was significantly associated with only one variable in this study. Those with more relationship problems tended to have higher social comparison orientations. Perhaps this means that the tendency to compare predisposes people to focus more on their negative outcomes.

Despite the fact that several of the key hypotheses of the current study could not be supported, a number of interesting findings emerged that warrant further exploration in the future. I found it particularly interesting that although participants tended to rate the positive media portrayals as significantly less realistic than the negative media portrayals, they tended to believe their own relationships were more similar to the positive portrayals than the negative portrayals and actually tended to believe their relationships were somewhat better than the idealistic movie portrayals. Participants in more committed relationships also tended to rate the relationship quality of the media portrayals lower than participants in less committed relationships. Perhaps these findings indicate protective behaviors on the part of people in long-term relationships, degrading the relationships of others that might otherwise negatively impact their perceptions of their relationship.

Limitations

A number of limitations to the current study should be addressed. It is possible that a significant effect of the media portrayal conditions could not be captured in the current study because it is a small effect requiring a larger sample size in order to establish significance. Cohen's (1992) work on power indicates that in order to achieve power of .80 for a small

effect size (*d* of .10) with $p < .05$ for an ANOVA examining differences between groups, 322 participants in each of the groups would be necessary. For the three groups explored herein, therefore, nearly a thousand participants may have been necessary to detect a significant effect, if in fact a small effect exists. Such a sample was beyond the reach of the current study. However, a similar future study utilizing a larger sample may uncover an effect if one does actually exist.

It is also possible that the brief movie clips used (all of a length between 5-10 minutes) were not sufficient to elicit the strong downward comparison necessary to impact perceptions of one's own relationship. Perhaps if it were practical to do so in the future, it would be useful to examine the effects of a full-length feature film on perceived relationship quality. The additional benefit that this would serve is that it would curb any issues with participants not fully understanding the storyline of a brief clip as it is pulled out of context.

A final possible reason for failing to find an effect of the movie clips on relationship perceptions relates to the order in which participants completed measures for the study. After viewing and evaluating the movie clips, participants were assessed on self-esteem and prior media exposure. The majority of the prior media exposure measure involved reflecting on the positive and negative relationship attributes of participants' favorite television shows and movies. It is possible, and indeed likely, that focusing on these other programs cleared participants' minds of the relationships portrayed in the movie clips, and in turn diluted any effect those clips would have on relationship perceptions. This is a notable limitation that should be remedied in future studies of this kind. A simple solution would be to evaluate prior media exposure before participants view and evaluate the movie clips.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS

The current studies offered some meaningful insight into the intricacies of relationship social comparison. Study 1, utilizing a longitudinal survey design, explored the relative impact of relationship social comparisons with family members, friends, and media portrayals as predictors of relationship comparison level, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability at a study follow-up approximately three months later. The most important insight gained from Study 1 was that choice of upward versus downward comparison targets do indeed affect people's perceptions of their relationships as well as their relationship stability. Upward comparisons emerged as a detriment to relationships, with participants who had chosen an upward comparison target experiencing lower relationship quality and stability than participants who had chosen a downward or similar target. It is likely that choice of an upward versus downward comparison target in the context of this study reflects participants' social comparison tendencies in their daily lives, with people tending to focus on comparison relationships of better quality experiencing deflated relationship perceptions and lower stability in comparison to those who focus on downward targets.

Study 2 utilized an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to view and evaluate brief movie clips with positive and idealistic portrayals of relationships or negative and cynical relationship portrayals (or were in a control condition that did not view movie clips). Participants then evaluated their own relationships to determine if the forced upward (to a better quality relationship) or downward (to a lower quality relationship) comparison would impact their relationship perceptions. Contrary to hypotheses, participants' relationship perceptions could not be raised or lowered following exposure to

upward or downward relationships. Results did indicate, however, that judging the movie clip relationship social comparison targets more negatively did indeed have a bolstering effect on relationship satisfaction. These results, along with the results of Study 1, suggest that free choice of comparison targets and people's unique and subjective perceptions of those targets are crucial for a meaningful social comparison effect to impact perceptions of one's relationship. It is possible that social comparison processes work differently in close relationships than they do for individual attributes. The current studies lend credence to the idea that, in close relationships, an upward comparison can threaten one's perceptions of that relationship, and that there is not a bolstering effect of downward comparisons. The current studies also point to the importance of perceived similarity to relationship comparison targets, in many cases serving as a stronger predictor of outcomes than the upward or downward nature of the target. It appears that our ability to assimilate towards positive ideals and dissimilate away from negative prototypes can, it itself, bolster perceptions of our own relationships.

APPENDIX A: STUDY 1 MEASURES

1. What is your gender? (Circle one) Female Male

2. What best describes your current relationship status?

   1) Dating casually
   2) Dating seriously
   3) Engaged
   4) Married

3. How many months have you been in your current relationship? _____

4. Are your parents divorced?

   1) yes
   2) no

5. What percentage of marriages do you believe will end in divorce? Please write a percentage between 0 and 100%.

   _____

6. What are your five favorite television shows?

   a) Title #1 _____

   How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

   Rarely Often
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

   How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

   Not at all Positively ... Very Positively
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

   How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

   Not at all Negatively ... Very Negatively
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

b) Title #2 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

c) Title #3 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

d) Title #4 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

e) Title #5 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

7. What are your five favorite movies?

a) Title #1 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

b) Title #2 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

c) Title #3_____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely						Often
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

d) Title #4_____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely						Often
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

e) Title #5 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely						Often
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

8. On average, how many minutes a day do you spend reading for pleasure?

_____ minutes

9. On average, how many hours a day do you spend listening to music (radio, CDs, tapes, MTV, etc.)?

_____ hours

10 On a typical week day (Monday through Friday), for how many hours do you watch TV/Videos during each of the following times? (Please write numbers in the spaces below.)

6 am – Noon _____

Noon – 6 pm _____

6 pm – Midnight _____

Midnight – 6 am _____

11. On a typical weekend day (Saturday or Sunday), for how many hours do you watch TV/Videos during each of the following times? (Please write numbers in the spaces below.)

6 am – Noon _____

Noon – 6 pm _____

6 pm – Midnight _____

Midnight – 6 am _____

For Items 12-21, please circle a number between 1 and 4 to indicate your agreement with the statement.

12. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

13. At times, I think I am no good at all.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

14. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

15. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

16. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

17. I certainly feel useless at times.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

18. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

19. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

20. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

21. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

Participants next saw one of the following three sets of directions:

Consider the romantic relationship of your mother or father if they are not still together. If they are still together, please rate the relationship they have with each other. If neither of your parents is in a relationship, you may complete the following measures on your perceptions of the relationship of a sibling, aunt, uncle, or other close family member currently involved in a relationship.

Consider the romantic relationship of one of your close friends. Please complete the following measures on your perception of that relationship.

Consider a movie or television show that you have seen in the last 4 weeks that has a storyline addressing intimate relationships. Please complete the following measures on your perception of the central relationship.

22. How well do these partners meet each others' needs?

Not at All Well				Very Well
1	2	3	4	5

23. In general, how satisfied is this couple with their relationship?

Not at All Satisfied				Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

24. How good is this relationship compared to most?

Not at All Good				Very Good
1	2	3	4	5

25. How often does this couple wish they hadn't gotten into this relationship?

Rarely				Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

26. To what extent has this relationship met this couple's expectations?

Did Not Meet Expectations at All			Met and Exceeded Expectations	
1	2	3	4	5

27. How much do these partners love each other?

Not at All				Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

28. How many problems are there in this relationship?

Very Few Problems				Lots of Problems
1	2	3	4	5

For items 29-37, please circle a number between 1 and 4 to indicate your agreement with each statement.

29. These partners provide one another with a sense of emotional security and well-being.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

30. These partners feel a lack of emotional closeness with one another.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

31. These partners can depend on one another to help when they really need it.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

31. If something went wrong, these partners would not come to one another's assistance.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

32. These partners feel they could not turn to one another for guidance in times of stress.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

33. These partners can turn to one another for advice if they are having problems.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

34. These partners enjoy the same social activities.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

35. These partners do not share each other's interests and concerns.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

36. These partners do not respect one another's skills and abilities.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

37. These partners' competence and skills are recognized by one another.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

Circle items between 38 and 66 that represent problematic areas in this couples' relationship.

38. Communication

39. Unrealistic expectations of partner

40. Demonstration of affection

41. Lack of loving feelings

42. Sex

43. Power struggles

44. Decision making/problem solving

45. Money management/finances

46. Value conflicts
47. Role conflict
48. Children
49. Serious individual problems
50. Extra-relationship affairs
51. Household management
52. In-laws/relatives
53. Conventionality
54. Jealousy
55. Employment/jobs
56. Recreation/leisure time
57. Alcoholism
58. Problems related to previous relationships
59. Psychosomatic problems
60. Friends
61. Addictive behavior other than alcoholism
62. Personal habits
63. Physical abuse
64. Religious differences
65. Health problems/physical handicap
66. Incest

67. What do you believe the chances are that this relationship will still be together…

… in 6 months? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

…in 5 years? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

…for the duration of the couple's lifetime? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

For the following items, consider your own relationship.

68. How well does your partner meet your needs?

Not at All Well				Very Well
1	2	3	4	5

69. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Not at All Satisfied				Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

70. How good is your relationship compared to most?

Not at All Good				Very Good
1	2	3	4	5

71. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?

Rarely				Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

72. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

Did Not Meet Expectations at All			Met and Exceeded Expectations	
1	2	3	4	5

73. How much do you love your partner?

Not at All				Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

74. How many problems are there in your relationship?

Very Few Problems				Lots of Problems
1	2	3	4	5

For items 75-84, please circle a number between 1 and 4 to indicate your agreement with each statement

75. Your relationship with your partner provides you with a sense of emotional security and well-being.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

76. You feel you lack emotional closeness with your partner.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

77. You can depend on your partner to help you if you really need it.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

78. If something went wrong, you feel your partner would not come to your assistance.

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

79. You feel you could not turn to your partner for guidance in times of stress.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

80. You can turn to your partner for advice if you are having problems.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

81. Your partner enjoys the same social activities that you do.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

82. You feel your partner does not share your interests and concerns.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

83. You feel your partner does not respect your skills and abilities.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

84. You feel your competence and skills are recognized by your partner.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

Circle items between 85 and 113 that you feel represent problematic areas in your relationship.

85. Communication

86. Unrealistic expectations of partner

87. Demonstration of affection

88. Lack of loving feelings

89. Sex

90. Power struggles

91. Decision making/problem solving

92. Money management/finances

93. Value conflicts

94. Role conflict

95. Children

96. Serious individual problems

97. Extra-relationship affairs

98. Household management

99. In-laws/relatives

100. Conventionality

101. Jealousy

102. Employment/jobs

103. Recreation/leisure time

104. Alcoholism

105. Problems related to previous relationships

106. Psychosomatic problems

107. Friends

108. Addictive behavior other than alcoholism

109. Personal habits

110. Physical abuse

111. Religious differences

112. Health problems/physical handicap

113. Incest

Please complete items 114 – 150 by circling a number between -3 and 3 to represent how these characteristics of relationship compare to your expectations.

114. The amount of love you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

115. The amount of compatibility that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

116. The amount of mutual respect you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

117. The extent to which your needs are met

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

118. The amount of affection your partner displays

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

119. The amount of commitment you experience from your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

120. The amount your partner is willing to listen to you

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

121. The degree to which your interpersonal communications are effective

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

122. The amount of companionship you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

123. The amount of relationship equality you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

124. The amount of relationship equality you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

125. The amount of confiding that occurs between you and your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

126. The amount your partner is trusting of you

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

127. The fairness with which money is spent

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

128. The amount of time you spend together

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

129. The degree of physical attractiveness of your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

130. The amount of conflict over daily decisions that exist

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

131. The amount of interest in sex your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

132. The amount of arguing over petty issues that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

133. The amount of sexual activity that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

134. The amount of conflict over the use of leisure time that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

135. The amount of criticism your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

136. The amount that you and your partner discuss sex

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

137. The amount to which you and your partner agree on your lifestyle

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

138. The amount of disagreement over friends you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

139. The amount of freedom you experience in pursuing other friendships

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

140. The amount to which your partner supports your choice of an occupation

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

141. The amount that responsibility for household tasks is shared

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

142. The amount of conflict over money you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

143. The amount of jealousy your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

144. The amount of privacy you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

145. The degree to which you and your partner agree on the number of children to have

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

146. The amount of responsibility your partner accepts for household tasks

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

147. The amount of money that you have

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

148. The degree of parental approval for your relationship that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

149. The amount of emotional support you experience from your friends

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

150. The amount of contact that you have with your partner's family

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

151. What do you believe the chances are that this relationship will still be together…

… in 6 months? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

…in 5 years? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

…for the duration of the couple's lifetime? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%) _____

152. How does the relationship that you assessed earlier compare to your current relationship?

1) Much worse
2) Slightly worse
3) About the same
4) Slightly Better
5) Much better

153. How similar is the relationship satisfaction of the relationship that you assessed earlier to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

154. How similar is the quality of partner support of the relationship that you assessed earlier to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

155. How similar are the relationship problems of the relationship that you assessed earlier to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

156. How similar is the stability of the relationship that you assessed earlier to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

For items 157-167, please circle whether the statement is 'True' or 'False'.

157. I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing.

True False

158. I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things

True False

159. If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.

True False

160. I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.

True False

161. I am not the type of person who compares often with others.

True False

162. I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.

True False

163. I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences.

True False

164. I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.

True False

165. I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.

True False

166. If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it.

True False

167. I *never* consider my situation in life relative to that of other people.

True False

We would like to contact you towards the end of the semester by e-mail or phone for a few final questions. This e-mail or phone call will come from Cutrona Research Lab and it should take just a minute or two for you to respond.

Please check one of the following:

_____ I wish to be contacted to participate in additional questions.

What e-mail address may we contact you at? _____

What phone number may we contact you at? _____

_____ I do not wish to be contacted to participate in additional questions.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR STUDY!!!

Follow-Up E-Mail:

Hello,

If you recall, you participated in a study called Perceptions of Our Own and Others' Relationships towards the beginning of the semester. You provided us with this e-mail address in order to complete a couple of follow-up questions to complete our study. We would greatly appreciate you responding to these questions via e-mail at your earliest convenience—it should just take a minute or two to respond. Just hit 'Reply' and type your answers directly in the text of the e-mail next to each question.

Question 1: Are you still currently involved in the relationship that you were in at the beginning of the semester? (Type 'yes' or 'no')

Question 2: If you are NOT still in that relationship, approximately what month did it end?

Please complete Questions 3-9 if you are still involved in your relationship. Please type a number from 1-5 in response to each question.

Question 3: How well does your partner meet your needs?

Not at All Well				Very Well
1	2	3	4	5

Question 4: In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Not at All Satisfied				Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

Question 5: How good is your relationship compared to most?

Not at All Good				Very Good
1	2	3	4	5

Question 6: How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?

				Very Often
Rarely				
1	2	3	4	5

Question 7: To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

Did Not Meet Expectations at All				Met and Exceeded Expectations
1	2	3	4	5

Question 8: How much do you love your partner?

Not at All				Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

Question 9: How many problems are there in your relationship?

Very Few Problems				Lots of Problems
1	2	3	4	5

Again, we greatly appreciate you taking the time to respond to these questions. For further information about this study, contact Kristin Wesner (kwhaley@iastate.edu or 515-450-4196) or Dr. Carolyn Cutrona (ccutrona@iastate.edu). If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB administrator in 1138 Pearson Hall at (515) 294-3115 or dament@iastate.edu. If you would like to speak with a trained counselor, contact Student Counseling Services at (515) 294-5056.

Best,
Cutrona Research Lab

APPENDIX B: STUDY 2 MEASURES

Movie Clip #1

1. How happy is this couple with their relationship?

Very Unhappy									Very Happy
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. How positive is the relationship portrayed in the video?

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

3. How negative is the relationship portrayed in the video?

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

4. How intense were the positive emotions portrayed in the interaction?

Very Unintense									Very Intense
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. How intense were the negative emotions portrayed in the interaction?

Very Unintense									Very Intense
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6. How realistic of relationships was this portrayal?

Very Unrealistic									Very Realistic
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7. Have you seen the movie from which this clip was pulled? (Circle one) Yes No

8. How does the relationship portrayed in this clip compare to your current relationship?

1) Much worse
2) Slightly worse
3) About the same
4) Slightly Better
5) Much better

9. How similar is the relationship portrayed in this clip to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Movie Clip #2

10. How happy is this couple with their relationship?

Very Unhappy									Very Happy
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

11. How positive is the relationship portrayed in the video?

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

12. How negative is the relationship portrayed in the video?

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

13. How intense were the positive emotions portrayed in the interaction?

Very Unintense									Very Intense
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

14. How intense were the negative emotions portrayed in the interaction?

Very Unintense									Very Intense
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

15. How realistic of relationships was this portrayal?

Very Unrealistic									Very Realistic
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

16. Have you seen the movie from which this clip was pulled? (Circle one) Yes No

17. How does the relationship portrayed in this clip compare to your current relationship?

1) Much worse
2) Slightly worse
3) About the same
4) Slightly Better
5) Much better

18. How similar is the relationship portrayed in this clip to your own romantic relationship? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

Not at All Similar									Very Similar
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

19. What are your five favorite television shows?

f) Title #1 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely						Often
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

g) Title #2 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely						Often
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

h) Title #3 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

i) Title #4 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

j) Title #5 _____

How often do you watch this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this show? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

20. What are your five favorite movies?

f) Title #1 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

g) Title #2 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

h) Title #3_____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

i) Title #4_____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

j) Title #5 _____

How often do you watch this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 7)

Rarely Often
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How positively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

How negatively are romantic relationships portrayed in this movie? (Circle a number between 1 and 10)

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

21. On average, how many minutes a day do you spend reading for pleasure?

_____ minutes

22. On average, how many hours a day do you spend listening to music (radio, CDs, tapes, MTV, etc.)?

_____ hours

23. On a typical week day (Monday through Friday), for how many hours do you watch TV/Videos during each of the following times? (Please write numbers in the spaces below.)

6 am – Noon _____

Noon – 6 pm _____

6 pm – Midnight _____

Midnight – 6 am _____

24. On a typical weekend day (Saturday or Sunday), for how many hours do you watch TV/Videos during each of the following times? (Please write numbers in the spaces below.)

6 am – Noon _____

Noon – 6 pm _____

6 pm – Midnight _____

Midnight – 6 am _____

25. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself

1) Strongly agree
2) Agree
3) Disagree
4) Strongly disagree

26. At times, I think I am no good at all.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

27. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

28. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

29. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

30. I certainly feel useless at times.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

31. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

32. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

33. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

34. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

UNDERGRADUATE RELATIONSHIPS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please respond to the following questions. Some of these may be personal. However, as indicated by the letter of information you read and signed for this study, your responses are confidential and only the investigators associated with this study will have access to them. Individual responses will not be shared with any persons other than the research team. You are free to skip or decline to answer any questions about which you are uncomfortable and free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

1. Your relationship with your partner provides you with a sense of emotional security and well-being.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

2. You feel you lack emotional closeness with your partner.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

3. You can depend on your partner to help you if you really need it.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

4. If something went wrong, you feel your partner would not come to your assistance.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

5. You feel you could not turn to your partner for guidance in times of stress.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

6. You can turn to your partner for advice if you are having problems.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

7. Your partner enjoys the same social activities that you do.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

8. You feel your partner does not share your interests and concerns.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

9. You feel your partner does not respect your skills and abilities.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

10. You feel your competence and skills are recognized by your partner.

    1) Strongly agree
    2) Agree
    3) Disagree
    4) Strongly disagree

Circle items between 11 and 39 that you feel represent problematic areas in your relationship.

11. Communication

12. Unrealistic expectations of partner

13. Demonstration of affection

14. Lack of loving feelings

15. Sex

16. Power struggles

17. Decision making/problem solving

18. Money management/finances

19. Value conflicts

20. Role conflict

21. Children
22. Serious individual problems
23. Extra-relationship affairs
24. Household management
25. In-laws/relatives
26. Conventionality
27. Jealousy
28. Employment/jobs
29. Recreation/leisure time
30. Alcoholism
31. Problems related to previous relationships
32. Psychosomatic problems
33. Friends
34. Addictive behavior other than alcoholism
35. Personal habits
36. Physical abuse
37. Religious differences
38. Health problems/physical handicap
39. Incest

Please complete items 40 – 74 by circling a number between -3 and 3 to represent how these characteristics of relationship compare to your expectations.

40. The amount of love you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations		Far exceeds Expectations	
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

41. The amount of compatibility that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

42. The amount of mutual respect you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

43. The extent to which your needs are met

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

44. The amount of affection your partner displays

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

45. The amount of commitment you experience from your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

46. The amount your partner is willing to listen to you

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

47. The degree to which your interpersonal communications are effective

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

48. The amount of companionship you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

49. The amount of relationship equality you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

50. The amount of confiding that occurs between you and your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

51. The amount your partner is trusting of you

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

52. The fairness with which money is spent

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

53. The amount of time you spend together

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

54. The degree of physical attractiveness of your partner

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

55. The amount of conflict over daily decisions that exist

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

56. The amount of interest in sex your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

57. The amount of arguing over petty issues that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

58. The amount of sexual activity that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

59. The amount of conflict over the use of leisure time that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

60. The amount of criticism your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

61. The amount that you and your partner discuss sex

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

62. The amount to which you and your partner agree on your lifestyle

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

63. The amount of freedom you experience in pursuing other friendships

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

64. The amount to which your partner supports your choice of an occupation

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

65. The amount that responsibility for household tasks is shared

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

66. The amount of conflict over money you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

67. The amount of jealousy your partner expresses

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

68. The amount of privacy you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

69. The degree to which you and your partner agree on the number of children to have

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

70. The amount of responsibility your partner accepts for household tasks

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

71. The amount of money that you have

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

72. The degree of parental approval for your relationship that you experience

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

73. The amount of emotional support you experience from your friends

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

74. The amount of contact that you have with your partner's family

Far below Expectations			Meets Expectations			Far exceeds Expectations
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

75. How well does your partner meet your needs?

Not at All Well				Very Well
1	2	3	4	5

76. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Not at All Satisfied				Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

77. How good is your relationship compared to most?

Not at All Good				Very Good
1	2	3	4	5

78. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?

Rarely				Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

79. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

Did Not Meet Expectations at All			Met and Exceeded Expectations	
1	2	3	4	5

80. How much do you love your partner?

Not at All				Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

81. How many problems are there in your relationship?

Very Few Problems				Lots of Problems
1	2	3	4	5

82. What do you believe the chances are that this relationship will still be together…

… in 6 months? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%)

_____

…in 5 years? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%)

_____

…for the duration of the couple's lifetime? (Give a percentage between 0 and 100%)

_____

For items 83-93, please circle whether the statement is 'True' or 'False'.

83. I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing.

True False

84. I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things

True False

85. If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.

True False

86. I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.

True False

87. I am not the type of person who compares often with others.

True False

88. I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.

True False

89. I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences.

True False

90. I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.

True False

91. I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.

True False

92. If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it.

True False

93. I *never* consider my situation in life relative to that of other people.

True False

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