

Ghosts From the Past: An Examination of Romantic Relationships and Self-Discrepancy

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ABSTRACT. Researchers have previously reported a negative association between romantic involvement and the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self. The authors present a schema-based model of romantic involvement and self-discrepancy to help explain this association, focusing on the impact of terminated relationships—“ghosts from the past.” In Study 1, participants primed with a past relationship reported increased self-discrepancy relative to participants primed with a present relationship. Study 2 indicated that this increased self-discrepancy was the result of reexperiencing emotionally negative past romantic relationships. Study 3 revealed the role of depressive affect in negative past romantic relationships. Finally, Study 4 indicated that depressive affect mediated the relation between reexperiencing negative past romantic relationships and experiencing self-discrepancy.

Keywords: affect, priming, romantic relationship, self-discrepancy

HOW DO ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS alter the way that people see themselves? This question has recently (re)emerged as a focal point of research on the self and romantic relationships. Researchers have described several changes to the self or *self-concept*—one’s representation of one’s attributes—that are associated with romantic involvement. Involvement in a close relationship may expand the contents of the self (Aron & Aron, 1986), verify the self (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992), enhance the positivity of the self (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), and, in some instances, even deflate the self (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998).

Recent work on the impact of close relationships on self-concept change has been extensive and fruitful. We hope to expand this line of inquiry by

addressing the question of whether terminated relationships have the same potential as current relationships to influence self-concept. There is often an obsessive quality to incipient relationships, and some definitions of love incorporate notions of obsession (e.g., manic love; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). Past relationships can be similarly preoccupying; consider, for example, that of the jilted lover who cannot move on (Forward & Buck, 1991), or the “hot” past secret relationship (Wegner, Lane, & Dimitri, 1994). Broken relationships that once seemed to hold much promise may particularly consume the thoughts of some people, as one partner ponders what went wrong and engages in counterfactual thinking. Involuntarily terminated relationships may even contain an element of the *Zeigarnik effect* (better recall for interrupted tasks than completed ones), as the jilted partner ruminates over the relationship and considers the possibility of resuming it. Consequently, ruminating over a past relationship may lead to various negative outcomes such as vulnerability to depression, drops in self-efficacy in relationship (or even nonrelationship) domains, or problems in self-regulation. Thus, these “ghosts from the past” may come to haunt some individuals in the present. In this study, we focused on one of the more intriguing effects of romantic relationships on the self: the impact that romantic involvement has on *self-discrepancy*, which is the difference between the actual self and the ideal self.¹

Higgins (1987) has articulated a comprehensive theory of self-discrepancy that incorporates affective, motivational, and self-regulatory components that are relevant to relationships. In addition, Robins and Boldero (2003) have proposed *relational discrepancy theory* to apply self-discrepancy theory to dyadic relationships. Just as a nurturing romantic relationship may reduce self-discrepancy (Campbell, Sedikides, & Bosson, 1994), its termination may increase self-discrepancy. Indeed, even thinking back to an ended relationship may temporarily shift one’s self-discrepancy.

The process or processes by which romantic involvement affects self-discrepancy is a critical issue in this field of research, which researchers have investigated principally by using psychoanalytic and interdependence theory. In the present article, we take a different course and suggest a schema-based model of self-discrepancy and romantic relationships (see Baldwin, 1992, 1994; Baldwin, Carrel, & Lopez, 1990; Baldwin & Holmes, 1987). Our model has two basic premises. The first is that self-discrepancy, one’s

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representations of a romantic partner, and a particular pattern of emotional experience (specifically, depression and dejection) are linked cognitively. The second is that one can use social-cognitive methods, such as *cognitive structure activation (priming)*, to demonstrate experimentally the existence of these cognitive links. Before presenting our model in detail, we review the psychoanalytic and interdependence approaches to self-discrepancy in romantic relationships.

Romantic Relationships and Self-Discrepancy: Psychodynamic and Interdependence Models

Researchers and theorists, armed with insights drawn primarily from psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1922/1959) and interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), have suggested that romantic involvement is associated with a smaller discrepancy between the actual self (i.e., current self-representation) and the ideal self (i.e., the representation of an individual's hopes and aspirations; Mathes & Moore, 1985). Indeed, in at least one study using cross-sectional data, researchers found that romantically involved individuals reported smaller self-discrepancies than did noninvolved individuals (Campbell et al., 1994).

Freud (1922/1959) articulated what is perhaps the classic statement on self-discrepancy and romantic relationships, on which Reik (1944) further elaborated. According to Freud, the experience of falling in love is accompanied by the projection of the ego-ideal onto the love object. The projection of the ego-ideal has three important consequences: (a) it reduces the discrepancy between the perceiver's ego and ego-ideal; (b) it causes the perceiver to idealize the target of affection; and (c) it causes the perceiver to experience an affective state of mania or joy that is coupled with the idealization of the partner. Freud (1922/1959) also noted that this projection of the ego-ideal is a mechanism through which an individual can meet narcissistic or self-esteem needs without actual achievement. There is empirical evidence for some predictions derived from this model. Individuals with low self-esteem fall in love more intensely (Dion & Dion, 1975) and may report enhanced attraction to targets of affection (Mathes & Moore, 1985). Individuals have also reported that increased self-esteem is a benefit of romantic relationships (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Furthermore, there is evidence that individuals idealize their romantic partners, and that this idealization is related to relationship satisfaction (Murray et al., 1996).

In his paper "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1917/1957) wrote that his melancholic and depressed patients reported a cluster of symptoms—including images of object loss (e.g., the loss of a parent) and a loss of self-regard, often to the point of self-loathing—that is arguably evidence of a large self-discrepancy. Freud proposed that these symptoms are the result, in part, of the displacement of anger at the lost other onto the self. From our perspective, what is particularly

important about this view is the insight that past relationships—not only present ones—may be linked to self-discrepancy and affect. That is, relationships that have terminated may nevertheless influence how closely related individuals feel their actual selves are to their ideal selves.

Researchers in the interdependence tradition have reported evidence for a specific model of growth toward the ideal self in romantic relationships (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). Their model differs considerably from psychoanalytic positions in that the underlying mechanism is behavioral confirmation rather than projection or displacement. Researchers have coined the phrase *the Michelangelo phenomenon* for this process of behavioral confirmation (Drigotas et al.). The Michelangelo phenomenon has three elements. First, an individual expects a romantic partner to behave in ways that are consistent with the partner's ideal self. Second, the individual behaves in ways that support expression of the partner's ideal self. Third, as a result of the individual's supportive behavior, the partner begins to perceive a reduction in the distance between the actual and ideal selves. Researchers have noted that individuals who experience this process of behavioral confirmation report greater relationship well-being (Drigotas et al.).

The preceding brief review of the existing models of self-discrepancy and romantic relationships raises several important issues. Each of the models predicts self-discrepancy change only in limited circumstances, such as romantic relationships that (a) are associated with a manic experience of love, (b) promote displaced anger, (c) contain partner expectations that are consistent with the individual's ideal self, or (d) are satisfying. In addition, the different models link self-discrepancy to affective states, including mania and depression. What do these findings suggest for a schema-based model of romantic involvement and self-discrepancy? First, like previous models, a schema-based model is likely to operate only under certain conditions, to which one must pay careful attention to identify. Second, a schema-based model is likely to involve affective states or relationship satisfaction. Therefore, we will pay particular attention to issues of affect and satisfaction as we describe our model.

Representing the Self and Other

We address the issue of self-discrepancy and romantic involvement from a social-cognitive perspective, rather than a psychodynamic or interdependence perspective. To describe more fully the theoretical rationale underlying our schema-based model, we begin by reviewing the literature on relational schemas, with an emphasis on research involving self-discrepancy.

The notion that the self-concept is closely linked to internalized relationships with others has been a central tenet of theorizing and research on the self-concept since the turn of the 20th century. James (1890) postulated that the self (or constellation of selves) reflects the multiplicity of our social relationships. Freud

(1923/1961) theorized that the individual psyche is structured around interpersonal relationships, especially relationships from early childhood. Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) described a self that is formed through reflected appraisals from related others. Baldwin (1897) largely rejected the idea of the individual self in favor of a concept of the self-in-relationship—what he termed the *socius*.

More recently, researchers have developed a social-cognitive approach to explicate more clearly the interplay between the self and internalized others. At the center of this approach is a view of interpersonal relationships as schemas (i.e., cognitive-affective representational structures) containing (a) a representation of the self, (b) a representation of the other, and (c) expectancies or beliefs about the relation between the two representations (Baldwin, 1992). The social-cognitive view of the self-in-relationship has both theoretical and methodological advantages. Theoretically, understanding internalized relationships as schemas allows one to explicate the interplay of the self, the relationship, and one's affect with more precision than with previous models. Freud's concept of objects and hydraulic-like energy systems, James's "stream," which contains images of an empirical "me," Cooley's "looking glass self," and Mead's "generalized other" all contain some (albeit vague) interconnected representational components. However, using the social-cognitive perspective, one can describe more clearly the links between the self, the other, and various affective states.

The precision of the social-cognitive approach is particularly evident in the available experimental methods for studying close relationships. The methodology in this area has developed apace in the past 2 decades, as researchers have moved beyond correlational methods and, for example, manipulated partners' discussions or interpersonal constructs (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). By conceptualizing the organization of relationship experiences into schemas, researchers can study relationships by using additional, newer laboratory techniques such as response time latencies and recall measures (Baldwin, 1994). Perhaps the most useful of these techniques for our purposes is *cognitive structure activation*, or *priming*. Priming techniques allow the researcher to activate selectively one element in the self-other-affect system and to measure changes in another part of the system, thus demonstrating the degree of connection between the various system elements (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991). A significant benefit of priming is the potential for researchers to experimentally manipulate elements of close relationships that previously have been open only to quasi-experimental methodology. For example, a researcher may prime a specific attachment style and then measure an outcome variable of interest (Green & Campbell, 2000). More relevant to the present research, one can also prime specific romantic relationships. Priming allows researchers to draw stronger causal inferences between variables than do the cross-sectional or longitudinal designs that are more commonly used in the study of close—particularly romantic—relationships. Priming offers particular promise for assessing the impact of terminated romantic relationships on self-discrepancy. Indeed, it is one of the only methods available, because it is unlikely that individuals would be willing and able to visit a psychologist's laboratory with a former romantic partner.

Oughts, Ideals, and Affect

Higgins (1987) found that discrepancies between the *ought self* (i.e., the representation of an individual's obligations and responsibilities), the ideal self, and the actual self elicited specific affective consequences. These self-discrepancies, in turn, are linked cognitively to representations of related others. We will refer to these internalized relationships as *oughts* and *ideals*. Although the focus of this article is on ideals, for purposes of clarity and completeness we will preface our remarks with a brief discussion of oughts.

Oughts. The *actual-ought self-discrepancy* is linked with the affective states of anxiety, fear, and guilt (Higgins, 1987) and also may be linked to certain internalized others. Freud (1923/1961) provided the classic example of an ought relationship with his concept of the superego. Freud hypothesized that the image of the castrating father, fueled by the child's own aggression, becomes the basis of morality, guilt, and conscience later in life. Researchers with a social-cognitive orientation have gained an empirical foothold on ought relationships through the use of priming methodologies. For example, Baldwin et al. (1990) reported evidence for an ought discrepancy in a relational context. They found that Roman Catholic individuals primed with a picture of the Pope evinced a specific affective response—*anxiety*—and a change in self-concept—a feeling of less competence (Baldwin et al., 1990). In a similar experiment, Baldwin (1994) demonstrated that priming an individual with the image of a critical other, such as a scowling advisor, led to a temporary reduction in self-esteem and, under some conditions, to negative affect. These findings demonstrate that a specific internalized relationship may be linked cognitively to affect and self-representations.

Ideals. The *actual-ideal self-discrepancy* is linked with the affective states of dejection and sadness (Higgins, 1987), which are principal concomitants of depression. It may also be linked to certain internalized others. For example, James (1890, p. 316) described an "ideal tribunal" or "ideal spectator" that both "haunted" individuals and led them to feel "real and valid." To our knowledge, no previous researcher has demonstrated a link between actual-ideal self-discrepancy and relational schemas. One of the central contributions of the present article is to demonstrate such a link.

Self-Discrepancy and Romantic Relationships

We wish to highlight three points from our literature review. First, the self is linked cognitively to representations of others. Second, these links may extend to ought and ideal selves (although the latter has not been demonstrated empirically). Third, the actual-ideal self-discrepancy is linked to affect, specifically

dejection or depression. Our approach to self-discrepancy and romantic relationships takes each of these links into account.

The basic assumption of our model is that, at the representational level, cognitive links exist between self-discrepancy, one's representations of a romantic partner, and dejection-related affect. One can demonstrate these links by using the relationship-priming paradigm that Baldwin and colleagues (Baldwin, 1992, 1994; Baldwin et al., 1990) pioneered. However, there is more to our model than conceptualizing and identifying the cognitive linkage of the three central variables. Equally interesting are two additional questions. First, under what circumstances does romantic involvement lead to dejection-related affect and self-discrepancy? Answering this question involves the search for moderators of the effect. Second, how does romantic involvement—either present or past—affect self-discrepancy? Answering this question involves the search for mediators of the effect—the mechanisms underlying the link between romantic involvement and self-discrepancy. In a series of four studies, we attempted to demonstrate and illuminate more clearly the nature of the link between romantic involvement, self-discrepancy, and affect. We began by demonstrating a link between romantic involvement and self-discrepancy. In subsequent studies, we examined the moderators and finally the mediators of this phenomenon.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we looked at two specific issues. First, we examined the effect of romantic relationships on self-discrepancy by priming participants with their partner from either a present (i.e., ongoing) or past (i.e., terminated) romantic relationship. On the basis of past literature (Campbell et al., 1994), we predicted that priming participants with a past romantic partner would lead to a greater self-discrepancy than would priming participants with a present romantic partner. Second, we tested whether the priming of present romantic relationships or the priming of past romantic relationships primarily drove the effect that romantic involvement had on self-discrepancy. That is, does priming a present romantic relationship reduce self-discrepancy, or does priming a past romantic relationship increase self-discrepancy? To answer this question, we primed some participants with a romantic relationship and other participants with a nonromantic relationship. The nonromantic relationship prime served as a control against which we were able to compare the self-discrepancy of individuals who had received either the present romantic relationship prime or the past romantic relationship prime.

Method

Design and Participants

The independent variable—relationship prime—was between-participant and had four levels: (a) current romantic partner, (b) past romantic partner, (c)

friend, and (d) acquaintance. The dependent variable was self-discrepancy. Participants were 81 undergraduate students—42 women, 39 men—who completed the experiment in groups of 6 or less people.

Procedure and Materials

Priming paradigm. Participants began the experiment by sitting in separate cubicles in a laboratory. The experimenter announced to participants that the study would explore how they “imagine events, places, and people.” The experimenter then asked participants to write down examples of (a) specific places (including a campus building), (b) events (e.g., walking to a store), and (c) people. For the people category, we randomly assigned participants to write down the first name of either (a) a close friend, (b) an acquaintance (e.g., someone they “had met once or twice”), or (c) their current romantic partner (or, if they were not currently in a romantic relationship, their most recent romantic partner). This instruction was our manipulation of the relationship priming.

We instructed participants to close their eyes and to imagine for 1 min the campus building that they had written. To bolster the cover story regarding imagination, we had participants rate the visualization for both vividness and clarity. We then told participants to imagine for 1.5 min a specific event—their most recent bus ride—and to rate the image’s vividness and clarity. Finally, we had participants imagine for 3 min an acquaintance, close friend, current romantic partner, or past romantic partner.

We employed taped instructions for the person visualization to keep participants focused on the task during the entire 3-min time period. The rationale given to participants for the taped instructions was that visualizing people may be a more complex and difficult process than visualizing places or events. We adapted the instructions from Baldwin and Holmes (1987). The taped-instruction sentences specifically guided participants in their visualization (e.g., telling them to “imagine talking with this person”), with pauses of approximately 5 s between the instruction sentences. The taped directions, which lasted approximately 2 min 15 s, concluded with the instruction for participants to “continue to imagine this person” until 3 min had elapsed from the start of the tape. We then had participants report final vividness and clarity ratings.

Self-discrepancy measure. Participants next filled out the widely used Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989), which measures self-discrepancy. On the SAQ, we asked participants to rate themselves, relative to other college students, on 10 dimensions: (a) intellectual ability, (b) social competence, (c) artistic ability, (d) athletic ability, (e) physical attractiveness, (f) leadership ability, (g) common sense, (h) emotional stability, (i) sense of humor, and (j) discipline. Participants made their ratings on a 10-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*bottom 5%*) to 10 (*top 5%*); thus, their scores could range from 10 to 100, with a high score rep-

resenting a small self-discrepancy. The SAQ has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in college age samples (Pelham & Swann). In our study, the SAQ was internally consistent, $\alpha = .84$ ($M = 71.95$, $SD = 14.39$, range = 39–100).

Participants then completed (a) a general information survey on data such as their age, ethnicity, and the length of their past or present relationship; and (b) the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS contains 7 items (e.g., “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship”; “How many problems are there in your relationship”) that are measured on 5-point scales. In previous studies, the RAS has demonstrated good reliability and validity. We asked participants to respond to the RAS from the perspective of the relationship with which they were primed. When the participants had finished the RAS, we thanked and thoroughly debriefed them.

Results

There were no sex effects in the data, so we dropped that variable from our analyses. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the relationship-prime variable, with the SAQ score as the dependent measure, revealed a significant main effect, $F(3, 77) = 2.83$, $p < .04$. The two control conditions containing nonromantic relationship primes (i.e., friends and acquaintances) were not significantly different, $p < .86$, so we collapsed them into one friends–acquaintances variable. A one-way ANOVA, which we performed with three relationship levels (present relationship, past relationship, and friends and acquaintances), again revealed a significant main effect, $F(2, 78) = 3.97$, $p < .02$. We computed contrasts among the three means and, as predicted, priming a past romantic relationship ($M = 63.53$, $SD = 14.19$) led to greater self-discrepancy than did priming either the friends–acquaintances relationship ($M = 72.51$, $SD = 12.44$), $p < .03$, or the current romantic relationship ($M = 76.39$, $SD = 13.21$), $p < .007$. The difference between the friends–acquaintances prime and the current romantic partner prime was not statistically significant, $p < .28$.

Ancillary Analyses

We conducted ancillary analyses in an attempt to address a potential confound: All participants who were primed with a present romantic relationship were involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the experiment, whereas none of the participants who were primed with a past romantic relationship were involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the experiment. To address this issue, we divided the friends–acquaintance group into two separate groups: participants who were in current romantic relationships ($M = 73.50$, $SD = 12.67$) and participants who were not in current romantic relationships ($M = 70.67$, $SD = 11.98$). These two groups did not report significantly different self-discrepancies, $p < .53$. This finding indirectly supports our contention

that the relationship prime, rather than the relationship status of the individual, influenced self-discrepancy in Study 1.

In a final ANOVA, we used the RAS data to examine the relationship satisfaction of participants who were in our three priming conditions, $F(2, 76) = 4.33, p < .02$. Individual contrasts indicated that participants in the past romantic relationship condition ($M = 20.87, SD = 6.84$) reported less satisfaction than did individuals in the current relationship condition ($M = 27.61, SD = 5.42$), $p < .006$, or in the friends-acquaintances condition ($M = 26.10, SD = 5.18$), $p < .02$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 were consistent with our model. First, these results confirmed Campbell et al.'s (1994) finding that self-discrepancy is linked to romantic involvement. However, the use of a priming paradigm allowed us to draw stronger causal implications than did the correlational design used previously. Taken together, our results and those of Campbell et al.'s suggest a causal relation between romantic involvement and self-discrepancy such that the former affects the latter.

Especially intriguing about the Study 1 results was the combination of (a) the link between increased self-discrepancy and the priming of a past romantic relationship and (b) the lack of a link between self-discrepancy and the priming of a current romantic relationship. These data suggest that past romantic relationships may affect self-discrepancy more than present romantic relationships do. In other words, thinking about a current romantic relationship does not decrease self-discrepancy as much as thinking about a past romantic relationship increases self-discrepancy.

The next logical step in this line of research was to determine why being primed with past romantic relationships increased self-discrepancy. The most ready explanation was that participants viewed past romantic relationships more negatively than they did present romantic relationships, so thinking about these ended relationships led them to feel more distant from their ideal selves. Both our analysis of relationship satisfaction in Study 1 and Drigotas et al.'s (1999) research on self-discrepancy and relationship satisfaction support this explanation.

We had examined the positivity of present and past romantic relationships in two small pilot studies. In the first pilot study, we asked 60 participants—31 of whom were involved in a relationship at the time, 28 of whom were not involved in a relationship at the time, and 1 of whom did not disclose relationship status—to rate both their present and their past romantic relationships. Participants made their ratings on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*). As we had expected, participants rated current romantic relationships ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.76$) more positively than they did past romantic relationships ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.84$), $F(1, 34) = 30.37, p < .0005$. Next, we compared scores for positivity of past relationships between (a) participants who were romantically involved and (b) participants who were not romantically involved. This comparison allowed

us to test whether the reduced positivity of past romantic relationships that was reported by romantically involved participants was the result of a contrast with their present romantic relationships. These two groups did not differ in a between-participants ANOVA, $F(1, 57) = 0.10, p < .75$. In short, participants uniformly saw past relationships as more negative than present relationships.

Given that people usually view past romantic relationships negatively, the manner in which individuals consider such relationships may determine the impact that past relationships have on self-discrepancy. Specifically, if individuals emotionally reexperience (or *immerse* themselves) in negative past romantic relationships, they may experience greater self-discrepancy. This statement is both intuitive and consistent with the broad literature on rumination and depression (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). However, if individuals reflect on the past—even the negative past—in a way that is not overly emotional and that allows them to compare their present states with their states in the past, they may feel closer to their ideal selves (i.e., experience lesser self-discrepancy). For example, if a woman was in a terrible relationship and managed to get out of it, she may look back and conclude that she has grown a great deal. This prediction is also consistent with the literature on downward social comparison (Wills, 1981), although, in this case, the comparison is between situations rather than between people.

In the second pilot study, we examined the effects of immersion in the past versus the effects of comparison of one's present and past states. The study involved 70 undergraduate student participants: 43 women, 26 men, and 1 participant who did not report his or her sex. Each participant answered the following question:

If you had a rather bad romantic relationship in the past, which orientation would make you feel better? That is, which way of approaching your past bad relationship would be better (or more positive) for you at this point: (a) "to think about my relationship and compare myself now to how I was then"; or (b) "to reexperience all the emotions I felt at the time of my relationship"?

As we had expected, significantly more participants (64 out of 70) chose the comparison option, $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 57.73, p < .001$. In the minds of our participants, immersing oneself in a negative past relationship had more negative consequences for the self than did comparing one's current state of affairs to one's past state of affairs. We took a more systematic approach to this issue in Study 2.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated, via a priming procedure, either an immersion process or a comparison process with respect to a negative past relationship. We predicted that this manipulation would moderate the effect of a negative past relationship prime on self-discrepancy. Specifically, we predicted

that priming participants to immerse themselves in a negative past relationship would result in a greater reported self-discrepancy than would priming participants to compare themselves now (i.e., their present selves) to the way they were during the negative past relationship (i.e., their past selves).

Method

Design and Participants

The independent variable—a relationship prime—was between-participant and had two levels: immersion and comparison. The dependent variable was the SAQ measure of self-discrepancy. Participants were 125 undergraduate students—99 women, 26 men—who completed the experiment in groups of up to 10 people. We excluded 1 additional participant who reported a self-discrepancy score that was more than 3 standard deviations from the mean.

Procedure and Materials

Priming paradigm. We asked each participant to list the name of a past romantic partner with whom they had experienced a very negative relationship. Participants then rated the positivity of that relationship on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*), and they listed three reasons why the relationship was negative. Participants' had an average score of 2.82 ($SD = 1.26$, range = 1–6), suggesting that they were successful at identifying negative past relationships.

We employed taped instructions to tell participants to imagine the past romantic partner for 3 min. We designed the instructions as a manipulation of the comparison condition versus the immersion condition. The comparison condition included four statements that elicited comparison: (a) "Examine the quality of your relationship with this individual as if you were an outside observer"; (b) "Think about the differences in your life between then and right now"; (c) "Try to decide whether you are better off or worse off now compared to then"; and (d) "Compare who you were in this past relationship with who you are now." The immersion condition included four statements that elicited a reexperiencing of the past relationship: (a) "Picture the person's face. Really try to get an experience of the person being with you;" (b) "Try to feel the person there with you;" (c) "Immerse yourself in the emotions that you felt when you were in this relationship. Feel the same feelings that you felt;" and (d) "Imagine talking with this individual. Try to reexperience what you originally experienced." Unlike in Study 1, we presented these taped instructions through personal cassette players with headphones to increase the power of the manipulation. Participants then wrote down everything that came to mind for 1 min 30 s following the manipulation.

Self-discrepancy measure. As in Study 1, participants then filled out the SAQ. We modified this measure slightly from Study 1 to focus it on the experience of the

self at the present moment (i.e., participants reported how they felt “right now”). As in Study 1, the SAQ in Study 2 was internally consistent, $\alpha = .82$ ($M = 66.66$, $SD = 13.11$, range = 31–96).

At the end of the study, we thanked and thoroughly debriefed the participants.

Results and Discussion

There were no effects of participants' sex or actual relationship status (i.e., being romantically involved at the time of the study vs. not being romantically involved at the time of the study), so we dropped these variables from our analyses. We conducted a one-way ANOVA on the relationship prime variable, $F(1, 123) = 3.96$, $p < .05$. As we had predicted, participants in the comparison condition ($M = 68.95$, $SD = 10.18$) reported feeling closer to their ideal selves than did participants in the immersion condition ($M = 64.34$, $SD = 11.27$). The results of Study 2 were consistent with our hypothesis that the manner in which individuals think about negative past romantic relationships determines the effect of the relationship on self-discrepancy.

STUDY 3

One question that Study 2 did not allow us to answer was the specific nature of the affective experience in past relationships that individuals were reexperiencing. Both Higgins (1987) and Freud (1917/1957) in his early work stress the importance of dejection-related affect to the experience of self-discrepancy in past relationships. On the basis of Higgins' and Freud's work, we predicted that dejection-related affect would be the particular emotional state that considering a negative past relationship would elicit. In Study 3, we tested this prediction by comparing the experience of dejection-related affect to the experience of three other negative affective states—depletion, agitation, and loss—found to be of particular relevance to close relationships (Scalise, Ginter, & Gerstein, 1984).

Method

Design and Participants

The independent variable, affect type, was within-participant and had four levels: (a) depletion, (b) dejection, (c) agitation, and (d) isolation. The dependent variable was the degree to which participants experienced each of these emotions while thinking about a past relationship. Participants were 100 undergraduates—82 women, 18 men—who completed the experiment in groups of up to 10 people.

Procedure and Materials

As in Study 2, we asked participants to (a) list an individual with whom they had experienced a very negative past romantic relationship; (b) rate that relation-

ship on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*); and (c) list three reasons why they considered the relationship to be negative. The primed relationships were similarly negative to those that participants identified in Study 2 ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.18$, range = 1–6).

Participants then completed the Loneliness Rating Scale (LRS; Scalise et al., 1984), which lists 40 affective states that correspond to four subscales: (a) Depletion (e.g., drained, numb), Dejection (e.g., sad, depressed), Agitation (e.g., guilty, scared), and Isolation (e.g., abandoned, unloved). Participants rated each affective state on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*), and we averaged the 10 items from each of the four affect subscales. Each of the four resulting scales had good internal consistency (see Table 1).

After participants had completed the LRS, we had them answer general demographic questions. We then thanked and thoroughly debriefed them.

Results and Discussion

There were no effects of sex or relationship status in these analyses, so we did not examine these variables further. We conducted a one-way, within-participant ANOVA on affect type, which indicated a significant main effect, $F(3, 297) = 57.46$, $p < .0005$. We then computed contrasts between the affect composite measures. Consistent with our predictions, participants' Dejection scores ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.86$) were generally greater than were the averages of their Depletion, Agitation, and Isolation scores ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.84$), $F(1, 99) = 133.23$, $p < .0005$. Additionally, participants felt dejection significantly more strongly than they did the next most strongly felt affect, agitation ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.77$), $F(1, 99) = 22.07$, $p < .0005$.

TABLE 1. Affect Scores After Priming With Negative Past Romantic Relationship (Study 3; $N = 100$)

Subscale	M	SD	Range	α
Depletion	2.71 _a	0.80	1.0–5.0	.86
Dejection	3.11 _b	0.86	1.3–5.0	.90
Agitation	2.82 _a	0.77	1.3–5.0	.91
Isolation	2.33 _a	0.91	1.0–5.0	.92

Note. Scores are from the four affect subscales of the Loneliness Rating Scale (LRS; Scalise, Ginter, & Gerstein, 1984). Higher scores represent higher levels of affect (as measured by participant self-ratings on the LRS). Different subscripts indicate statistically significant differences between means, $p < .05$.

Our goal in Study 3 was to establish the particular nature of the affective experience that accompanied the primed negative past romantic relationship. Consistent with our predictions, dejection was associated with participants' thinking about a past romantic relationship. This finding is also consistent with past theorizing and research linking loss and depression (Freud, 1922/1959). It seems likely that dejection is partly or wholly responsible for the increased self-discrepancy that we found in previous experiments.

STUDY 4

Our goal in Study 4 was to combine aspects of Studies 1–3 to examine what role dejection-related affect plays in the effect that priming has on self-discrepancy. To accomplish this, we immersed participants in a past relationship via our priming procedure. We measured two aspects of the negativity of the relationship: the negativity of the overall relationship and the negativity of the immediate visualization experience. We then measured dejection-related affect and self-discrepancy. We predicted that affect would mediate the relation between the negativity of the past relationship and self-discrepancy. In other words, we expected that relationship negativity would lead to dejection-related affect that would, in turn, lead to increased self-discrepancy.

Method

Design and Participants

In Study 4 we used three predictor variables: (a) overall relationship positivity, (b) positivity of the visualization, and (c) dejection. The dependent variable was self-discrepancy. Participants were 101 undergraduate students—89 women, 12 men—who completed the experiment in groups of up to 10 people.

Procedure and Materials

The procedure was similar to the one in Study 3. First, participants experienced the immersion–priming procedure. The prime was their most recent romantic partner. Before the actual priming procedure, each participant rated the overall positivity of the relationship on four 11-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*extremely*). These scales measured how “positive,” “satisfying,” “good,” and “pleasant” the past relationship was. We averaged the four measures of relationship positivity to create a composite measure, $\alpha = .97$ ($M = 6.79$, $SD = 2.19$, range = 1–11).

During the prime, participants wrote down “everything that comes to mind” for 1 min 30 s. At the end of the study, participants categorized each thought as either positive or negative. We subtracted the number of negative

thoughts from the number of positive thoughts; the resulting index served as our measure of *visualization positivity* ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 4.64$, range = $-7-14$). After the prime, participants rated the degree to which they were currently experiencing the 10 dejection-related items (e.g., sad, depressed) that we used in Study 3 (see Scalise et al., 1984). Participants made their ratings on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply*) to 9 (*definitely applies*). We created the measure of dejection by averaging the 10 dejection subscale items, $\alpha = .91$ ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.72$, range = $1-8$). Participants then completed the SAQ measure of self-discrepancy. We created the measure of self-discrepancy by summing the 10 self-discrepancy items, $\alpha = .69$ ($M = 67.32$, $SD = 11.34$, range = $37-97$). After participants had completed the SAQ, we thanked and thoroughly debriefed them.

Results and Discussion

The first step in our analyses involved correlating each of the measures. Consistent with our model, the visualization positivity measure, the dejection scale, and the self-discrepancy measure were correlated. Visualization positivity correlated negatively with Dejection, $r(99) = -.21$, $p < .05$, and with self-discrepancy, $r(99) = -.20$, $p < .05$. Dejection correlated positively with self-discrepancy, $r(99) = .26$, $p < .01$. The overall relationship-positivity measure correlated only with the visualization-positivity measure, $r(99) = .61$, $p < .0005$.

Our next step was to assess the mediational role of dejection in the relation between visualization positivity and self-discrepancy. We included visualization positivity and dejection as predictor variables in a regression analysis with the SAQ (i.e., closeness to ideal self) as the outcome variable. We hypothesized that if dejection had played the predicted mediating role between visualization positivity and self-discrepancy, then the relation between visualization positivity and self-discrepancy should have ceased to be statistically significant whereas the relation between dejection and self-discrepancy should have remained statistically significant (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This is indeed what happened: Visualization positivity no longer predicted self-discrepancy, $\beta = .153$, $df = 98$, *ns*, whereas dejection continued to predict self-discrepancy, $\beta = -.226$, $df = 98$, $p < .02$.

In summary, participants who had more negative past romantic relationships experienced more negative visualizations of the relationships. However, it was the content of the visualization—not the overall rating of relationship negativity—that predicted dejection and self-discrepancy; that is, a greater proportion of negative thoughts was associated with both dejection-related affect and with increased self-discrepancy. Most important, dejection-related affect mediated the link between visualization negativity and self-discrepancy. To the extent that their visualizations were negative, participants experienced increased dejection-related affect, which, in turn, led to an increase in self-discrepancy.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We began by suggesting a model of the links between romantic relationships, dejection-related affect, and self-discrepancy. In Study 1, we primed past or present romantic relationships, as well as non-romantic relationships, and found that self-discrepancy was influenced primarily by past romantic relationships: Visualizing a past romantic relationship led to a relatively greater self-discrepancy. Ancillary analyses suggested that the negative valence of past romantic relationships may, in part, account for this effect. In pilot studies, we confirmed that participants see past romantic relationships as negative and that immersion in negative past romantic relationships leads to greater self-discrepancy than does a comparison between the present state of the self and the negative past state. In Study 2, a priming study, we subsequently demonstrated the role of immersion (vs. comparison) in eliciting negative self-concept change. In Study 3, we focused on the link between negative past romantic relationships and affect, and we found that dejection, more than any other negative affective experience, colored participants' views of negative past romantic relationships. Finally, in Study 4, we combined all three of these elements: past romantic relationships, dejection, and self-discrepancy. We primed participants with a past romantic relationship and then measured dejection and self-discrepancy. We found that the valence of the primed relationship thoughts was associated with dejection and self-discrepancy: More negative visualizations led to more dejection and to greater self-discrepancy. Furthermore, dejection mediated the relation between valence of thoughts and self-discrepancy, indicating that thinking about a negative past romantic relationship can lead to dejection that, in turn, can lead to self-discrepancy. Consider a hypothetical example: Sue experiences thoughts surrounding her negative past romantic relationship with John—for instance, that he was insensitive or that he never called her. These negative thoughts lead Sue to experience dejection-related affect (i.e., sadness, depression). Finally, this dejection-related affect leads Sue to experience a discrepancy between her actual self and her ideal self.

Implications

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to present a schema-based model of the link between romantic relationships, self-discrepancy, and affect. Previous theory and research on the link between romantic involvement and self-discrepancy involved, almost exclusively, psychodynamic theory or interdependence theory. Our schema-based model has several similarities with these other models. For example, the schema-based model and the psychodynamic models share an emphasis on the cognitive or intrapsychic basis of self-discrepancy change in romantic relationships and on links to depression. However, our schema-based model differs from the psychodynamic models in the mechanism that we postulate to underlie the effect of romantic involvement on self-discrepancy:

Researchers who developed the psychodynamic models postulated unconscious mechanisms, such as projection and displacement, whereas in the schema-based model, we emphasize the activation of dejection-related affect linked to past experience in the relationship.

The schema-based model is similar to the interdependence model in that both models emphasize relationship satisfaction. However, these two models have important differences. For example, whereas the interdependence approach focuses on self-discrepancy change that occurs over the course of a relationship, the present schema-based model focuses on changes in self-discrepancy that occur after the romantic relationship is over. Even a terminated relationship can unexpectedly revisit an individual via reminiscence, as a ghost from the past. This ghost is powerful enough to influence, at least temporarily, people's perceptions of closeness to their ideal selves. Although the schema-based model is different from other models, we should note again that it is not incompatible with them. There are multiple routes to self-discrepancy change in romantic relationships.

Ghosts from the past have the potential to influence people in several negative ways. For instance, individuals who immerse themselves in negative past romantic relationships may be vulnerable to depression. Likewise, to the extent that individuals' ruminations on negative past relationships affect self-discrepancy, a range of self-regulatory problems may emerge; these may even include the risk of a drop in self-efficacy in areas outside of romantic relationships. For example, a past negative relationship may influence efficacy beliefs regarding performance in academic pursuits. Future researchers may want to consider studying in greater depth the negative effect that ghosts from the past can have on people's well-being.

By focusing on the important role of affect in self-concept change, in the present studies we were also able to shed light on the mechanism through which romantic involvement impacts self-discrepancy. The role of affect in our model is similar to the role it plays in several models of self-regulation that researchers have previously developed (Campbell & Green, 2007; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972). However, the cost that reminiscing about past negative romantic relationships exacts on self-regulation is unclear. Arguably, immersion in a negative past romantic relationship, with concomitant dejection and self-discrepancy, should lead to the desire to escape this unpleasant state, which individuals could attempt to do in at least three ways. First, they may suppress thoughts of negative past relationships. However, this strategy is likely to have limited success because efforts at thought suppression often have rebound effects (Wegner, 1994). Second, individuals may bring to mind successes in other aspects of their lives and thus decrease their self-discrepancy. Although we did not test this technique in the present studies, it is consistent with self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988). Finally, individuals may reduce self-discrepancy by dispassionately comparing their current selves to their past selves instead of emotionally immersing themselves in the past. This strategy is consistent with our findings,

given that we demonstrated experimentally the moderating role that an individual's approach to the past romantic relationship (i.e., comparison vs. immersion) plays in the process. This implication of our findings dovetails nicely with the clinical literature on rumination that has repeatedly indicated a link between depression and ruminating or obsessing about negative past events (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Our results appear to indicate that thinking about negative past romantic relationships in a more constructive fashion—that is, with an eye for comparing one's negative past with one's more positive present and future—causes decreased dejection and self-discrepancy.

Future Research, Limitations, and Conclusion

In the present work, we focused primarily on the negative implications of terminated relationships: Participants visualized negative past relationships in Studies 2 and 3, and in Study 3, they examined only the negative affective states of dejection, depletion, agitation, and isolation. In a longitudinal study of dating partners, Sprecher (1994) reported that, after a relationship break-up, individuals are likely to experience some positive emotions such as relief (though to a lesser extent than they experience accompanying negative emotions such as hurt). Such positive affective states similarly could influence self-discrepancy, and future researchers should consider both positive and negative feelings about relationships to examine more fully their impact on self-discrepancy. Future researchers examining both positive and negative past relationships should also address a potential alternative explanation for the results of Study 2: demand characteristics. Arguably, the immersion-condition instructions may have provided clues to participants about the purpose of the study, although we compensated somewhat for this problem by using, in Study 4, the same immersion paradigm but with different instructions (i.e., imagining the most recent past relationship, not a very negative relationship). Future researchers could employ immersion, comparison, and control instructions for both positive and negative past relationships. Future researchers could also address the somewhat curious finding in Study 4 that the overall rating of relationship positivity did not correlate with dejection or with self-discrepancy (although visualization positivity did correlate with both measures). It is possible that people access the relationship positivity from memory and that it has more of a comparison or growth component than an immersion component (with its negative emotional consequences), whereas when people think in greater detail about past relationships (become immersed in the past), more specific negative memories and feelings emerge and influence self-discrepancy. Stated another way, the ghosts from the past may emerge most strikingly under immersion or rumination conditions, consistent with our results in Study 3.

The present article adds to a growing body of literature addressing the impact of close relationships on the self. The self, contrary to what many have been

taught, is not an isolated structure. In the present studies, we demonstrated how cognitively reexperiencing a negative past romantic relationship affects an important aspect of the self: the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self. It is not only current romantic partners who change people; they are also affected by the thoughts they have about romantic partners in previous relationships. These ghosts from the past may come to mind when people least expect them, and they appear to influence how close they feel to their ideal selves.

NOTE

1. When referring to the discrepancy between the actual self and the *ought self*, we use the term *actual–ought self-discrepancy*.

AUTHOR NOTES

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