Seeing Virtues in Faults: Negativity and the Transformation of Interpersonal Narratives in Close Relationships

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It is proposed that individuals develop story-like representations of their romantic partners that quell feelings of doubt engendered by their partners' faults. In Study 1, dating individuals were induced to depict their partners as rarely initiating disagreements over joint interests. Such conflict avoidance was then turned into a fault. In scaled questionnaires and open-ended narratives, low-conflict individuals then constructed images of conflict-engaging partners. These results suggest that storytelling depends on considerable flexibility in construal as low-conflict Ss possessed little evidence of conflict in their relationships. Study 2 further examined the construal processes underlying people's ability to transform the meaning of negativity in their stories (e.g., seeing virtues in faults). Paradoxically, positive representations of a partner may exist—not in spite of a partner's faults—but because of these imperfections.

Coming to terms with the reality of a less-than-perfect partner is perhaps the greatest challenge in the more serious stages of a relationship's development. Faults in an intimate may engender doubts about whether the partner really is the "right" person as well as underline the considerable risks posed by interdependence. Yet, in the face of such threats to their convictions, partners may continue to experience strong feelings of hope for their relationship's ultimate success. This juxtaposition of hope and uncertainty enhances individuals' desire to "quell the babble of competing inner voices" underlying feelings of doubt (Jones & Gerard, 1967, p. 181).

We believe that individuals construct stories about their partners to diminish feelings of doubt, thereby affirming and protecting their positive convictions. Such convictions are prospective in nature, reflecting an individual's confidence that his or her partner really is the right person and can be counted on to be caring and responsive across time and situations (Holmes

& Rempel, 1989). We propose that individuals protect these convictions by weaving cogent stories that depict potential faults or imperfections in their partners in the best possible light. As we explore, the potential for considerable flexibility in the construal of apparent negativity may be an integral feature of this defensive storytelling process (e.g., Gergen, Hepburn, & Fisher, 1986). For instance, an individual might reconcile the threat posed by a partner's stubbornness during conflicts by interpreting it as a sign of integrity, rather than egocentrism. Such storytelling preserves the integrity of individuals' narratives, thereby promoting a sense of felt security in the face of the considerable risks posed by interdependence.

The structure of relationship-affirming narratives may change subtly over time as partners' positive and negative qualities become more or less salient. Early on in romantic relationships, individuals typically experience strong positive feelings as they attend almost exclusively to their partners' positive qualities (Holmes & Boon, 1990; Weiss, 1980). Self-presentation, interaction across restricted, positive domains, and intimates' desire not to perceive negative qualities (e.g., Brehm, 1988) likely all combine to create somewhat simple-minded, idealized narratives (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). As a result, individuals' initial sense of security in their relationships rests largely on the pull of positivity (cf. Brickman, 1987).

Yet, as interdependence increases, individuals begin interacting across broader, more conflictual domains, and the potential for partners to exhibit negative behaviors increases (Levinger, 1983). As the first, most directly affirming response to apparent negativity, individuals may simply deny that their partners' seemingly negative behavior reflects any underlying disposition or attribute. For example, individuals may avoid attributing negative traits to their partners by tagging behaviors suggestive of such traits to specific, unstable features of the situation (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). However, as instances of negative behavior across disparate situations accumulate, dispositional attributions become increasingly difficult to avoid. Somewhat paradoxically though, individuals may become increasingly moti-

vated not to see such faults, precisely because heightened negativity occurs coincident with increasing commitment and closeness (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). We argue that individuals restructure their stories about their partners in a way that transforms seemingly negative attributes, thus reducing their potential to threaten positive convictions.

Such defensive story-telling quells uncertainty, essentially allowing individuals to commit to their partners without fear or reservations. Consistent with this way of thinking, Brehm (1988) argued that intimates' struggle to keep feelings of uncertainty at bay drives the idealization process and fuels feelings of love. Similarly, mental models supporting trusting attitudes toward intimates may also result from a process of uncertainty reduction (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Finally, attachment theorists have also argued that most individuals develop general working models of intimate others that diminish feelings of insecurity in situations involving risk and vulnerability (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1977; Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Sroufe, 1983). These perspectives all focus on individuals' need to construct stories supporting confident, unequivocal conclusions about their partners. Yet, little empirical attention has been devoted to exploring the construction of these narratives.

In this article, we examine how individuals weave such confidence-instilling stories in the face of negativity. The imperatives of good storytelling may be such that individuals' narratives simply cannot contain any salient, nagging loose ends, as evidenced in less than positive, charitable construals of their partners' faults. Instead, a partner's positive and negative qualities may fit together in a unified whole or gestalt in which the meaning of potential faults is interpreted in the light of surrounding virtues (Asch, 1946; Asch & Zukier, 1984). Thus, the narratives individuals construct are not simply positively biased, somewhat disparate collections of positive and negative attributes. Rather, intimates' confidence in their partners and relationships—their sense of felt security—depends on an intricate interweaving of the meaning and significance of virtues and faults in their stories.

In our thinking then, the seeds of doubt may be best put to rest by quite directly defusing the significance of signs of negativity (cf. Taylor, 1991). As a primary means of defusing negativity, individuals might actually strive to turn apparent faults into virtues in their storytelling. For instance, apparent inexpressiveness might be construed as evidence of a partner's "strong and silent" nature. Similarly, an individual might interpret occasional stubbornness in an intimate as a sign of integrity. Such flexibility or interpretive licence in construal of course rests on the somewhat social-constructionist notion that intimates need not be bound by only one possible, "objective" interpretation of the evidence (e.g., Griffin & Ross, 1991). Instead, the meaning of potentially negative attributes or behaviors may be defined more by what the individual desires to see than by any quality inherent in the attribute (e.g., Gergen et al., 1986).

In contrast, Brickman (1987) argued that individuals may mask feelings of doubt by embellishing signs of positivity. Paradoxically, Brickman suggested that love and idealization may actually be enhanced by individuals' perception of imperfections in their romantic partners, as awareness of their partners' faults motivates intimates to embellish their partners' positive

qualities. In this way, the positive elements in individuals' stories overshadow and therefore neutralize the negative elements. Thus, compensation—embellishing existing virtues—may also mask feelings of ambivalence associated with faults in an intimate partner.

Finally, individuals may construct refutations or rationalizations for faults or imperfections whose interpretations are more constrained by the dictates of a stern social reality. In such cases, considerable flexibility in construal may extend to intimates' interpretation of the importance or significance of their partners' faults. Parallel to Allport's (1954) notion of "refencing," an individual may construct refutational or "Yes, but. . ." arguments that acknowledge a partner's faults yet minimize their significance (cf. Chaiken & Yates, 1985).

Through these various cognitive transformations, individuals neutralize or reinterpret negative attributes, effectively integrating them into good stories about responsive and caring partners. The two experiments we report in this article examine how individuals restructure their narratives in response to the threat posed by negativity. Given the latitude afforded by interpretive licence, intimates may simply see virtues in apparent faults. Alternatively, intimates might attempt to compensate for faults by embellishing their partners' existing virtues. Finally, individuals may construct elaborate rationalizations for their partners' more obvious weaknesses.

Experiment 1

As we developed our paradigm, the nature of our theory forced us to confront some important and intriguing methodological considerations. First, if story construction masks negativity, examining individuals' preexisting, positive stories will shed very little light on precisely how negativity has been absorbed. Therefore, we decided to create a negative attribute in the laboratory. To do this, we essentially led individuals to reinterpret an apparent virtue in their partners as a significant fault. We believe that this procedure captures intimates' experiences in developing relationships. Early on, dating partners' impressions of one another are quite pristine; the realization of one another's faults then mars this positivity. Finally, our interest in narrative restructuring required that we develop ways of eliciting and analyzing narratives as a dependent measure (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Agostinelli, & Weber, 1989).

To explore the process of narrative transformation, we introduced a mild threat to individuals' convictions by suggesting that their partners possessed a significant fault. We first induced participants to depict their partners as rarely initiating disagreements over joint interests. We then turned such conflict avoidance into a fault by exposing experimental subjects to a bogus *Psychology Today* article that argued for the intimacy-promoting aspects of conflict engagement. In depicting low conflict negatively, we expected to counter our participants' a-priori theories that low conflict was diagnostic of intimacy and thus threaten experimental subjects' positive convictions about the level of intimacy in their relationships.

We modeled our methodology on a dissonance paradigm in the tradition of Aronson (1969) and Steele (1988). Within this tradition, dissonance arises from individuals' desire to reduce

only those inconsistencies that pose a threat to the integrity of the self. In the present study, we expected threatened individuals to restructure their stories in ways that reduced the inconsistency between their initial accounts that their partners rarely initiated disagreements over joint interests and their awareness that conflict promoted intimacy. Participants' responses to two main dependent measures provided indices of such defensive restructuring. They first described their partners' willingness to initiate conflicts across a variety of domains exclusive of joint interests on a scaled measure of perceived conflict and then completed open-ended narratives depicting the development of intimacy in their relationships.

We expected threatened individuals to defuse the threat posed by the specter of a conflict-avoidant partner by constructing relationship-affirming narratives that both embellished their partners' virtues around conflict and refuted any faults. In other words, we expected threatened individuals to "see what they wanted to see"—conflict-engaging partners—despite their initial, public commitment to depictions of low-conflict partners. If threatened individuals were not completely successful in restoring the integrity of their narratives by enhancing their partners' conflict-related virtues, they were expected to construct narrative-bolstering refutations or rationalizations for any remaining weaknesses.

Earlier, we hypothesized that individuals restructure their narratives to protect their positive convictions from the threats posed by their partners' negative qualities. If this motivational hypothesis is correct, greater efforts to reconstruct narratives should be observed under conditions of greater threat. In the present study, the magnitude of the threat should depend on the degree to which individuals perceive their partners as falling short of the ideal standard of a conflict-engaging partner. Experimental participants who scored relatively low on a pretest index of disagreement over joint interests should be more threatened by the article than those who scored relatively high. Therefore, if threats to felt security drive story construction, then, paradoxically, low-conflict experimental subjects should be the most motivated to construct stories describing high conflict partners.

From a somewhat more cognitive perspective, however, the availability of compelling data should moderate individuals' ability to construct desired narratives. For example, Kunda (1990) argued that individuals will come to believe what they want to believe only to the extent that reason permits. Thus, the availability of cogent data may constrain individuals' ability to construct desired stories. In the present study, individuals who scored relatively high on the pretest index of their partners' tendency to initiate disagreements over joint interests, but still labeled their partners as rarely initiating such conflicts, presumably possessed the most evidence of disagreement in their relationships. Therefore, it might be easiest for these high-conflict individuals to construct positive stories about conflict-engaging partners, whereas the paucity of convincing evidence of conflict could possibly curtail extensive narrative revision among low-conflict individuals.

Our strong expectation was that low-conflict individuals' desire to defuse the threat to their convictions would prove more important in determining the structure of their stories than the social reality of their partners' actual attributes or past behav-

ior. Given our premise that individuals use considerable interpretive licence in their storytelling, we expected that even low-conflict subjects would experience little difficulty going beyond the available data in weaving their desired stories. Consequently, despite the apparent lack of supporting evidence, we expected that low-conflict, threatened subjects would be most likely to construct stories depicting conflict-engaging partners.

Method

Subjects

University of Waterloo undergraduates (37 women, 14 men) who were currently involved in dating relationships between 3 and 24 months in length participated in the study. The mean age of these subjects was 20.2 years. The average relationship length was 11.56 months (SD = 6.19). Subjects received either course credit or $6.00 for their participation in the 75-min study.

Procedure

On their arrival at the laboratory, participants were informed that the study had two primary foci. The first was the development of self-report strategies to assess individuals' perceptions of their partners and relationships. The second was an examination of how dating individuals evaluate research on dating relationships in the popular media.

Participants in the study were run either individually or in pairs. Subjects sat individually at one of two small tables separated by a screen. They were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition. Experimental and control subjects first completed a pretest battery assessing demographic characteristics and a variety of relationship quality variables, such as trust, love, and satisfaction.

Depicting a low-conflict partner. All participants then completed two short exercises designed to anchor their perceptions that their partners rarely initiated disagreements over the choice of joint interests and activities. In the first exercise, participants responded on 9-point scales to three statements about their partners' willingness to initiate disagreements over the choice of shared activities and interests (e.g., When I suggest an activity I enjoy but my partner does not enjoy, he or she is never reluctant to express his or her objection to this activity). In the second exercise, the respondents were given 2 min to list instances of their partners' initiating disagreements over joint activities or interests in the past month.

Participants were then provided with a written feedback sheet designed to consolidate the belief that their partners rarely initiated disagreements over joint interests. Finally, participants selected one of two descriptions as most characteristic of their partners' tendency to initiate disagreements over joint interests. The descriptions were (a) My partner tends to promote a sense of harmony in our interactions: My partner rarely initiates disagreements over the activities we may share, and (b) My partner is not particularly concerned with preserving harmony in our interactions: My partner quite frequently initiates disagreements over the activities we may share. The goal of the anchoring procedure was to induce subjects to choose the first description. The choice of this clear, salient label was designed to commit participants to the perception of a "conflict-avoidant" partner.[1]

Manipulation of the threat. Next, the experimenter reminded the

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participants that the study also examined people's evaluations of popular media articles on dating relationships. Experimental subjects then read the bogus *Psychology Today* article, "The Road to Intimacy." This article described how mature intimacy depended on partners' negotiation of accommodation periods. It contended that relationship intimacy depended on partners' willingness to engage issues by initiating disagreements over important sources of conflict. As an example, the article depicted partners who willingly engaged in disagreements over joint interests and activities as likely to be progressing toward a truly intimate relationship. Finally, the article concluded by noting that each couple might negotiate periods of accommodation in their own unique ways—ways that may not always include much open conflict. By linking the absence of disagreements to a less mature form of intimacy, we expected the article to threaten experimental participants' positive convictions about the level of intimacy in their relationships.

Dependent Measures

Experimental subjects completed the four primary dependent measures after they read the article. They completed these measures in the order in which they appear below. Participants were informed that their evaluation of the article was of primary interest to the investigators and that the other exercises would help the investigators understand this evaluation. Control subjects completed the primary dependent measures before they read the *Psychology Today* article.

We took considerable care to reduce experimental demands in our procedures. First, the experimenter emphasized that the investigators were interested in participants' understanding of what made their relationships unique, thus providing threatened individuals with the opportunity to claim that the article's contentions did not apply to their own relationships. The participants were also given permission to reject the arguments because the experimenter emphasized that the study's focus was on their critical evaluation of the article.

Perceived conflict. This 7-item questionnaire assessed subjects' perceptions of their partners' tendency to risk disagreement and conflict in a variety of different domains exclusive of joint interests. Therefore, it provided an opportunity for threatened individuals to depict conflict-engaging partners. Examples of such items included (a) My partner clearly expresses his or her needs even when he or she knows that these needs conflict with my needs, and (b) My partner is certainly willing to risk an argument by expressing attitudes or thoughts that I oppose. Subjects responded to these items (and all following items) on 9-point scales (1 = not at all true, 9 = completely true).

Confidence in intimacy. Five items assessing participants' confidence in the degree of intimacy in their relationships were intermixed with the items assessing perceived conflict in order to provide a sensitive index of any dampening of feelings of confidence induced by the experimental manipulation (e.g., My partner makes me feel completely secure in our relationship).

Intimacy narratives. Participants were next given 10 min to write narratives describing the development of intimacy in their relationships. The instructions for experimental and control conditions were designed to be as similar as possible so as to give control subjects an optimal opportunity to include the role of conflict as part of their narratives. The instructions for the control subjects contained a preamble stating that the *Psychology Today* article examined whether expressing disagreements had any implications for relationship intimacy. The instructions for both experimental and control subjects concluded as follows:

We are interested in your own account of the ways in which you feel your partner impedes or facilitates the development of intimacy in your relationship. Every relationship is different and partners may adjust to each other in ways that are quite different from those implied in the article. Please convey your honest feel-

ings about the manner in which intimacy grows in your relationship.

Intimacy-conflict theories. Participants then completed a two-item measure designed to assess their theories regarding the relation between intimacy and conflict (e.g., In general, disagreement and conflict is good for my relationship).

Evaluation of the article. Finally, participants evaluated the contentions of the article on five dimensions (e.g., intuitiveness, reasonableness, and believability).

Upon completion of the dependent measures, the subjects were probed for suspicion, fully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Intimacy Narratives Coding Dimensions

Three undergraduate raters (blind to condition and pretest conflict score) coded the intimacy narratives. One third of the narratives were randomly assigned to each rater. The narratives were parsed first into individual thought units. Then, the raters independently categorized each thought by its focus on conflict (presence of conflict, absence of conflict, or no mention of conflict), expansion of meaning (embellishment, rationalization, or no enhancement), and valence (positive, neutral, or negative). To maintain a clear focus for the reader, we elaborate only on the subset of these categories that were central to our theoretical interests. Examples of these categories are included in the Results section.

Conflict engagement. Such statements focused on the partner's (or participant's) initiation of conflicts or attitude toward engaging conflicts. Such statements were further coded as referring to either the intimacy-promoting or intimacy-impeding aspects of conflict engagement.

Embellishment of conflict engagement. Statements embellishing the meaning of conflict mushroomed a simple reference to the intimacy-promoting nature of conflict by explicitly linking conflict engagement to enhanced feelings of closeness, security, and warmth.

Conflict avoidance. Such statements focused on the partner's (or participant's) tendency to avoid conflicts or attitude toward conflict avoidance. Such statements were further coded as referring to either the intimacy-promoting or intimacy-impeding aspects of conflict avoidance.

Rationalizations for conflict avoidance. Such rationalizations included both refutational statements and relationship-enhancing attributions for the intimacy-impeding aspects of conflict avoidance. *Refutational statements* (cf. Chaiken & Yates, 1985) acknowledged the partner's conflict avoidance but in some way refuted or downplayed its importance in the relationship. *Relationship-enhancing attributions* (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985) speculated on the cause underlying conflict avoidance. Such attributions minimized the partner's responsibility for this fault by attributing it to the partner's good intentions or to unstable, specific factors.

Reliabilities. For each subject, we first calculated the number of occurrences of each category (e.g., conflict engagement statement, refutation for conflict avoidance). We then computed Cohen's Kappa for the narratives of 15 subjects. The interrater reliabilities were quite high, ranging from .85 to .95.

Results

We hypothesized that low-conflict experimental subjects would be most likely to depict conflict-engaging partners if threats to felt security moderate narrative restructuring. However, if data availability moderates narrative revision, high-conflict experimental subjects should be most likely to construct

stories embellishing conflict. To examine these competing hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses in which we first entered the main effects for condition (experimental vs. control) and the continuous pretest conflict index. We created this pretest index by averaging participants' responses to the three items assessing their partners' willingness to initiate disagreements over the choice of joint interests (α = .76). In the next step, we entered the condition by pretest conflict interaction term. In describing our results, we turn first to the analyses of the scaled measures and then discuss the content and structure of individuals' open-ended narratives. (No gender differences emerged in any of the analyses.)

Table 1 presents the regression statistics for each of the effects we describe below. For the purposes of interpretive clarity, we have also included the condition means for low and high pretest conflict groups (determined on the basis of a median split).

Intimacy–Conflict Theories

Did the article change experimental subjects' theories concerning the relationship benefits of conflict? To examine this question, we first averaged participants' responses to the two theory items to create a single index of their theories of the relationship benefits of conflict (α = .77). The regression analysis on this measure revealed a main effect for pretest conflict, a main effect for condition, and a significant interaction. As Table 1 illustrates, low-conflict experimental subjects were the most likely to revise their original theories that conflict was somewhat harmful (as evidenced in the baseline provided by low-conflict controls) to emphasize the importance of conflict in promoting intimacy. This interaction suggests that the manipulation posed the greatest threat to the integrity of low-conflict individuals' positive convictions: Their partners did not initiate certain types of conflicts and they now believed that conflict was diagnostic of intimacy.

Confidence in Intimacy

By depicting conflict avoidance as a fault, we expected to threaten experimental participants' positive convictions about the level of intimacy in their relationships. Consistent with this expectation, the regression analysis conducted on participants' responses to the confidence items (α = .61) yielded a marginal effect for condition ($p < .06$). The article appeared to dampen experimental subjects' confidence in the degree of intimacy in their relationships as these participants felt somewhat less secure and close to their partners than control subjects. This finding provides some tentative support for the success of the manipulation in instilling feelings of doubt in both low- and high-conflict subjects. We suspect this result would have been more pronounced (particularly for low-conflict subjects) if experimental subjects had not been simultaneously fending off such feelings by describing their partners' willingness to initiate conflicts.

Perceived Conflict

As the first route to alleviating any feelings of concern, threatened individuals, particularly those low in conflict, could construct images of partners who readily engaged conflicts in a variety of domains exclusive of joint interests. We averaged subjects' responses to the perceived conflict items to create a single index of perceived conflict (α = .75). With regard to the construct validity of this composite, we found a strong correlation between control participants' scores on the pretest conflict and perceived conflict indices, $r(26) = .70$, $p < .01$. This correlation suggests that the pretest index of disagreement over joint interests did indeed provide a reliable estimate of the general level of conflict in these relationships.

The regression analysis on this measure yielded significant main effects for pretest conflict and condition and a significant interaction. Consistent with the idea that threats to felt security moderate narrative restructuring, low-conflict threatened indi-

Table 1
Restructuring Indices for Study 1

| Dependent variable | Low conflict | | | | High conflict | | | | Conflict pretest | | Condition | | Interaction | |
| | Experimental | | Control | | Experimental | | Control | | | | | | | |
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	dfs	F	dfs	F	dfs
Intimacy-conflict theories[a]	6.08	1.16	4.23	1.77	6.21	1.25	6.19	0.97	5.52**	1, 49	5.23**	1, 49	6.40**	1, 48
Confidence in intimacy[b]	6.52	0.90	7.21	0.90	6.58	1.38	7.00	1.09	0.00	1, 48	3.60*	1, 48	1.28	1, 47
Perceived conflict[a]	5.86	1.17	4.47	1.23	6.29	1.26	5.91	0.63	15.18****	1, 49	7.78***	1, 49	4.02**	1, 48
Conflict engagement[c]	3.00	1.84	0.50	0.76	1.75	1.60	1.23	1.48	0.02	1, 47	11.90***	1, 47	4.73**	1, 46
Embellishment of conflict engagement[c]	0.64	0.50	0.07	0.27	0.33	0.65	0.31	0.48	0.45	1, 47	4.07**	1, 47	2.16	1, 46
Conflict avoidance[c]	1.27	1.49	0.14	0.36	0.17	0.58	0.08	0.28	2.72	1, 47	6.49***	1, 47	3.92**	1, 46
Rationalizations for conflict avoidance[d]	2.36	2.25	0.33	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.55	1, 34	6.45**	1, 34	1.50	1, 33
Proportion of refutations for conflict avoidance[e]	0.81	0.38	0.25	0.42	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.66**	1, 18	3.77*	1, 18	5.08**	1, 17

[a] $N = 52$. [b] $N = 51$. [c] $N = 50$. [d] $N = 37$. [e] $N = 21$.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

viduals constructed impressions of conflict-engaging partners. They depicted their relationships as involving substantially greater conflict than low-conflict controls. In fact, low- and high-conflict experimental subjects did not even differ on this measure of perceived conflict, even though the self-reports of controls suggested that their conflict histories differed dramatically. Apparently, low-conflict threatened participants compensated for their partners' weaknesses around disagreeing over joint interests by embellishing their tendency to initiate conflicts across a variety of other, more significant relationship domains.

Intimacy Narratives

If low-conflict subjects were actively restructuring their perceptions of conflict in their relationships in order to integrate the negative attribute into stories about responsive and caring partners, we would expect their intimacy narratives to contain the greatest emphasis on conflict. (One experimental and one control subject were eliminated from the following analyses because they did not provide narratives that could be coded on the dimensions we used.)

Conflict engagement. As a primary mechanism of defense, low-conflict threatened individuals should be quite motivated to embellish their partners' virtues around engaging conflicts. The regression analysis on the mean number of statements related to the intimacy-promoting aspects of conflict engagement revealed a marginal main effect for conflict pretest, a main effect for condition, and the expected interaction. As Table 1 illustrates, low-conflict threatened individuals' narratives contained the greatest focus on how their partners' active engagement of conflicts in a variety of relationship domains facilitated intimacy (e.g., "I feel he is facilitating our growth by increasingly being able to tell me when he disagrees with my opinions in all areas"). (The regression analysis applied to the mean number of statements related to the intimacy-impeding aspects of conflict engagement revealed no significant effects.)

Embellishment of conflict engagement. Threatened individuals, particularly those low in conflict, were also most likely to emphasize how their partners' willingness to initiate conflicts enhanced their positive feelings about the degree of intimacy in their relationships. They tended to mushroom simple references to conflict engagement by explicitly linking it to enhanced feelings of closeness, security, and warmth (e.g., "We've had only three disagreements . . . we were able to get to the root of the problem, talk it out, and we managed to emerge from it closer than before").

Conflict avoidance. If low-conflict threatened individuals were indeed grappling with their partners' possible weaknesses around conflict, their narratives should also contain the greatest reference to their partners' conflict avoidance impeding intimacy in their relationships. As expected, the regression analysis on the mean number of such statements revealed a marginal main effect for conflict pretest, a main effect for condition, and the expected conflict pretest by condition interaction. Low-conflict threatened subjects devoted the most attention to how their partners' periodic unwillingness to initiate disagreements in particular domains sometimes impeded the development of intimacy in their relationships, although such

references to conflict avoidance were far less frequent than references to conflict engagement. One example of such an admission of fault is, "On many occasions, I could tell that a problem existed, but she refused to talk about it, almost afraid of an argument." (Statements related to the intimacy-promoting aspects of conflict avoidance were quite infrequent.)

Rationalizations for conflict avoidance. Low-conflict individuals' acknowledgment of their partners' weaknesses around initiating conflicts suggests that they were not completely successful in restoring the integrity of their narratives by embellishing their partners' conflict-related virtues. Therefore, we expected these individuals to construct relationship-bolstering rationalizations or refutations for their partners' isolated weakness in initiating conflicts. Such rationalizations function to defuse or take the sting away from these imperfections.

To examine this hypothesis, we combined instances of participants' refutations and relationship-enhancing attributions for conflict avoidance to form an index of rationalizations. We conducted the regression analysis only for those individuals who mentioned the intimacy-impeding nature of conflict avoidance. This analysis yielded a marginal main effect for conflict pretest and a significant main effect for condition. (An examination of the proportion of refutations related to conflict avoidance yielded the anticipated significant interaction.) As Table 1 illustrates, the narratives of the low-conflict threatened group contained almost the only rationalizations for their partners' conflict avoidance. Examples of such integrative, defensive story-telling included

> On many occasions, I could tell that a problem existed, but she refused to talk about it, almost afraid of an argument . . . *on the other hand, she is very receptive to my needs, and willing to adapt if necessary. This is beneficial to our relationship.*

> My partner never really starts an argument *but knows that if something bothers me enough, I will bring it up. However, my partner has come to realize in the past few months that the development of intimacy is important to me and he seems to be more willing to negotiate problems that occur.*

Additional Findings

Self-presentational biases could pose one possible alternative explanation for defensive narrative construction among low-conflict threatened participants. These individuals might have underreported conflict on the pretest measure in order to present their relationships in a socially desirable light and then revealed the "true" amount of conflict in their relationships once this response became socially desirable. However, their acknowledgment of their partners' faults around initiating conflicts argues against a simple public impression management explanation of the results. Also, if low-conflict individuals were particularly susceptible to impression management concerns, they should also underreport or explain away other intimacy impediments. However, analyses of both the number of intimacy impediments not related to conflict and rationalizations for them revealed no significant effects.[2]

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[2] Experimental participants exhibited greater variance than control subjects on the narrative measures reported (likely stemming from low or near zero control group means). To examine whether this heteroge-

Discussion

In response to the specter of a conflict-avoidant partner, dating individuals constructed narratives that defused this threatening negative attribute. Within these stories, low-conflict threatened individuals embellished their partners' virtues around conflict and refuted their partners' faults. As a first response to the glimmer of this negative attribute, these individuals appeared to "see what they wanted to see"—conflict-engaging partners. To further bolster the integrity of their stories, they then constructed rationalizations or refutations for their partners' isolated weaknesses around conflict. Thus, Study 1 provides initial evidence that the integration of negative attributes drives the content and structure of individuals' representations.

Initially, we proposed that low-conflict individuals should evidence the greatest narrative restructuring if threats to positive convictions moderate narrative construction. On the other hand, if data availability moderates narrative construction, we expected high-conflict individuals to exhibit the greatest revisionism. In Study 1, only those threatened individuals low in conflict dramatically restructured their narratives to embellish the centrality of conflict. This restructuring appears all the more startling when we consider the stories told by low-conflict control participants. These stories, essentially an estimate of low-conflict threatened individuals' original impressions of their intimates, depicted partners who rarely initiated conflicts. Therefore, an apparent paucity of available data did not curtail narrative revision among low-conflict threatened individuals. Nor did the availability of data among high-conflict individuals result in a pronounced emphasis on conflict in their narratives. Rather, the magnitude of the threat to felt security—the degree to which individuals perceived their partners as falling short of the ideal standard of a conflict-engaging partner—appeared to drive story construction.

To the cynical, outside eye, low-conflict threatened individuals appeared unencumbered by data in their construction of narratives embellishing their partners' active engagement of conflict. These narratives actually appeared to whitewash differences in the interpersonal histories of low and high conflict individuals. However, if storytelling functions to quell intimates' feelings of doubt, the storytellers must perceive their narratives to be quite objective and reality based (e.g., Kunda, 1990). In other words, intimates must perceive their narratives as accurately reflecting their partners' behavior and attributes. Therefore, the central issue in understanding how intimates construct narratives that defuse negativity centers around the resolution of the following paradox: How can narratives that, at first glance, do not appear real, feel real to the intimate or storyteller?

Understanding the role of *poetic licence* in narrative construction may provide the key to resolving this paradox. As we have argued, individuals' transformation of faults into virtues within

confidence-instilling narratives may rest on considerable flexibility in the construal process (e.g., Griffin & Ross, 1991). For instance, in his theorizing on impression formation, Asch argued that construal processes play an integral role in individuals' maintenance of evaluatively consistent, unified impressions of others (Asch, 1946; Asch & Zukier, 1984). We believe that such interpretive licence in construal also buffers and sustains positivity in individuals' impression of their intimates. In our thinking, desired narratives function as interpretive filters that color the meaning and accessibility of partners' behavior and attributes. In this light, narratives are not divorced from data, but are instead based in part on individuals' motivated or idiosyncratic construal and construction of this data.

Experiment 2

We designed our second experiment to explore the particular aspects of the construal process underlying individuals' ability to weave seemingly negative, contradictory elements into relationship-affirming narratives. First, such interpretive licence in storytelling may directly depend on intimates' interpretation of the meaning of apparent negativity (e.g., seeing virtues in faults). Also, to the extent that individuals are free to construct their past in line with their desired conclusions, differential retrieval of virtues and faults may facilitate storytelling (M. Ross, 1989). Finally, intimates may possess considerable licence in deciding which of their partners' virtues and faults are even relevant to the success of their relationships.

In developing a paradigm to examine these construal processes, we kept two specific goals in mind. First, in order to more directly examine how a desired story guides individuals' construal of negative or contradictory evidence, participants provided and then interpreted their own data. Study 1 may have provided the optimal context for poetic licence to assert itself because low-conflict individuals had little vivid, compelling evidence of low conflict staring them in the face, so to speak. Instead, they were able to introspect and selectively pick and choose among fragmented memories and impressions in order to construct images of conflict-engaging partners. Therefore, in Study 2, we attempted to push the boundaries of poetic licence by examining whether it extends to individuals' interpretation of self-generated, contradictory, vivid evidence.

Second, Study 1 could not provide strong evidence that self-reported data availability does not affect the type of story threatened individuals tell. After all, the salience of conflicts, once they were primed, likely buffered high conflict individuals from perceiving a motivating threat to their sense of security. Thus, a broader or more diffuse threat—the importance of recognizing differences—was used in Study 2. Given the sometimes covert nature of differences, we felt that even those individuals who claimed relatively high awareness of differences would have difficulty feeling that they were sufficiently aware of all their differences. By threatening even high-differences individuals, we hoped to examine whether claimed awareness of differences influenced the types of construal processes individuals used in weaving their desired stories.

In this study, we attempted to threaten individuals' positive convictions by linking their apparent inattention to differences to a less mature form of intimacy. In depicting little awareness

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neity was responsible for the findings, we subjected the measures to square root transformations. These transformations eliminated the heterogeneity and all the results remained consistent. Nonparametric analyses of the condition effects (Mann-Whitney *U* or Wilcoxon Rank Sum *W* Test) also revealed consistent, significant findings.

of differences as negative, we expected to counter our dating participants' a-priori theories that perceiving only similarities was diagnostic of intimacy. We first induced participants to provide a pool of examples of similarities and differences, one that primarily consisted of similarities. Threatened individuals then read a bogus *Psychology Today* article that argued for the intimacy-promoting aspects of being aware of differences and warned against the dangers of assumed similarity. To directly explore the role of construal processes in shaping the meaning of specific pieces of evidence, we then gave participants the opportunity to provide any additional details they wished to their original pool of examples and to provide new examples of similarities and differences.

Despite having generated tangible evidence of their many similarities, we expected both low- and high-differences threatened individuals to reinterpret available evidence within stories that emphasized their awareness of differences. For instance, we expected threatened individuals to see virtues in faults by reconstruing the meaning of their similarities as evidence of their differences. They might also try to bolster their stories by mushrooming or exaggerating their original differences or by selectively remembering new differences and suppressing similarities. The latter construal processes may be particularly evident in high-differences individuals' constructions as the supporting evidence for such claims should be most readily available to them. Finally, if storytelling entails constructing idiosyncratic, relationship-enhancing theories about the importance of virtues and faults, threatened individuals might try to compensate for any potential weaknesses around recognizing differences by embellishing the significance of their similarities (Brickman, 1987). Alternatively, they might simply embellish the importance of their many virtues around recognizing differences.

Method

Subjects

University of Waterloo undergraduates (50 women and 15 men) who were currently involved in dating relationships between 3 and 24 months in length participated in the study. Their mean age was 19.5 years. The average relationship length was 11.45 months ($SD = 6.23$). Subjects received course credit for their participation in the 90-min study.

Procedure

On their arrival at the laboratory, subjects were greeted by a female experimenter and were given a brief oral introduction to the study similar to that used in Study 1. Participants were run through the experimental procedures individually. They were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition.

Pretest measures. As in Study 1, participants first completed a pretest battery assessing demographic characteristics and a variety of relationship quality variables. An index of participants' awareness of differences between themselves and their partners was also included. This 7-item index consisted of items directly assessing participants' awareness of differences (e.g., My partner's needs and expectations for our relationship differ from my own in many ways) and items assessing perceived similarity. Perceived similarity and differences items were strongly negatively correlated, $r(63) = -.59$. Participants made their

responses to these items (and all following items) on 9-point scales (1 = not at all true, 9 = completely true).

Claiming little awareness of differences. All participants then completed short exercises designed to anchor their perceptions that they were aware of few significant differences between themselves and their partners. In the first exercise, participants were given 3 min to list the similarities or differences they shared with their partners that they felt were most important for making their relationships work. All subjects were then provided with a feedback sheet designed to consolidate the belief that they were aware of few important differences. Then in an anchoring procedure, participants selected one of three alternatives as most representative of the respective ease with which they thought of differences and similarities. The goal was to induce subjects to endorse a description indicating that they had difficulty thinking of important differences.[3]

Manipulation of the threat. The experimenter then reminded the participants that the study also examined individuals' evaluations of popular media articles on dating relationships. Following this general introduction, the experimental subjects read the bogus *Psychology Today* article, "The Road to Intimacy." To control for elapsed time, control subjects read a filler article on subliminal perception.

"The Road to Intimacy" described how the successful negotiation of accommodation periods depended on both partners' willingness to recognize and acknowledge their important, subtle differences. Recognition of differences was linked to partners' increased understanding and responsiveness to one another's needs. The article also suggested that blindly idealizing a partner impeded intimacy because rigidly held assumptions of similarity were inevitably violated and resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction. In summary, the article posed a threat to individuals' positive convictions by linking their inability to think of significant differences to a less mature form of intimacy.

Dependent Measures

The measures are described in detail below; participants completed them in the order in which they appear.

Providing additional details to the original examples. In an effort to support revised claims that they were aware of important differences, threatened subjects might subtly shift or reconstrue the nature of their reported similarities and differences. To examine this possibility, we asked participants to review their original examples and to provide any additional details they felt might help the investigators better understand the meaning of these examples. The experimenter also emphasized that subjects need not provide further details if they felt that their examples were already sufficiently detailed.

Provision of new examples. To bolster their perceptions that they were indeed aware of their differences, individuals might also selectively recall new differences and suppress evidence of similarities. Therefore, we gave participants the opportunity to provide any additional examples of similarities or differences that came to mind. Again, the experimenter emphasized that subjects might not be able to think of any new important similarities or differences.

Perceived differences questionnaire. This 16-item questionnaire assessed participants' perceptions of the degree to which they differed from their partners in a variety of domains. We included both perceived differences and similarity items in this index (e.g., I am aware of a variety of ways in which my partner's preferred ways of dealing with conflict differ greatly from my own, and My partner and I are just like two peas in a pod; we are similar in so many ways). Similarity items were reverse scored in computing the index.

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[3] Fourteen participants indicated that they had little difficulty thinking of differences. We included these participants in all analyses we report. Excluding them did not change the pattern of results.

Confidence in intimacy. The five confidence items used in Study 1 were mixed with the perceived differences and similarities items to provide an index of any dampened feelings of confidence induced by the experimental manipulation.

Intimacy narratives. Participants were then given 10 min to write accounts describing the development of intimacy in their relationships. The instructions for experimental and control subjects were again designed to be as similar as possible to give control subjects an optimal opportunity to include differences in their narratives. Therefore, control instructions contained a preamble stating that the article examined whether partners' awareness of their differences had any implications for relationship intimacy. Otherwise, the instructions for writing the narratives for both experimental and control subjects mirrored those described in Study 1.

Intimacy-differences theories. This 6-item measure assessed participants' own theories concerning the relationship benefits of recognizing differences (e.g., In general, partners' recognizing their differences is very important for relationship intimacy).

Upon completion of the dependent measures, the subjects were probed for suspicion, fully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.[4]

Coding Dimensions

Two raters (blind to condition and pretest differences score) independently coded the additional details, new examples, and intimacy narratives. One half of the subjects were randomly assigned to each rater. The original examples first were identified as either similarities or differences.

Additional details. The additional details that participants provided to their original examples were coded as belonging to one of the following five mutually exclusive categories. *Defensive reconstrual* referred to the provision of details suggesting some degree of difference between partners to an example that was originally framed as a similarity. The category *offensive reconstrual* was applied when a participant provided details suggesting some degree of similarity between partners to an example that was originally framed as a difference. *Polarization* of similarities or differences referred to the provision of details suggesting that the similarity or difference was greater or more significant than the original example had indicated. *Meaning consistent elaboration* referred to a participant's provision of details that simply provided greater information about the similarity or difference without changing the meaning of the original example. *Examples left unchanged* were also categorized. Relevant examples of each category are included in the Results section.

Each example could then also be assigned either of the following codes. An *embellished meaning* code was applied if the participant provided details linking the similarity or difference to the presence of intimacy in the relationship, such as feelings of closeness and security. A *deemphasized meaning* code was applied if a participant provided details that refuted or lessened any potential bearing (usually negative) the similarity or difference might have on the quality of the relationship.

New examples. Each example was assigned to one of two categories. A *definitive difference* code was applied if a participant described a difference without providing any details suggesting any degree of underlying similarity. A *definitive similarity* code was applied if a participant described a similarity without providing any details suggesting any degree of underlying difference.

Intimacy narratives. The narratives were parsed first into individual thought units. Then, the raters independently coded each thought in terms of its focus on differences (presence, absence, or no mention) or similarities (presence, absence, or no mention), expansion of meaning (embellishment or not), and valence (positive, neutral, or negative).

Statements coded as *differences as facilitators* (or *impediments*) identified a participant's awareness of differences as promoting (or impeding) intimacy in his or her relationship. Differences statements were also identified as an example of an *articulated difference* (e.g., "He is more stubborn") or a simple *global declaration* that differences existed (e.g., "My partner and I are aware of our differences"). Finally, *embellishment of differences* was identified using the criteria for assessing embellishment of conflict employed in Study 1. Relevant examples of each category are included in the Results section.

Reliabilities. For each subject, we first calculated the number of occurrences of each category (e.g., defensive reconstrual, differences as facilitators). We then computed Cohen's Kappa for each of the dependent indices for 20 subjects. The interrater reliabilities were quite high, ranging from 0.90 to 1.00.

Results

We expected both low- and high-differences individuals to dampen the threat to their convictions by weaving available evidence, memories, and introspections into depictions embellishing their awareness of differences. We also wished to explore whether self-proclaimed availability of data influenced how low-differences versus high-differences individuals restructured their narratives. As in Study 1, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses in which we first entered the main effects for condition (experimental vs. control) and the continuous pretest differences index. We created this pretest index by averaging participants' responses to the eight items assessing perceived similarities (reverse scored) and differences ($\alpha = .88$). In the next step, we entered the condition by pretest differences interaction term. In describing our results, we turn first to the analyses of the scaled measures and then discuss the open-ended construal indices and narratives. (No gender differences emerged in any of the analyses.)

Table 2 presents the regression statistics for each of the effects we describe below. For interpretive clarity, we have also included the condition means.

Intimacy-Differences Theories

Were we successful in inducing a broader threat that challenged the theories of both low- and high-differences subjects? To answer this question, we averaged participants' responses to the six theory items assessing their perceptions of the relation between intimacy and recognizing differences ($\alpha = .71$). The regression analysis on this index revealed only the expected main effect for condition. Threatened individuals revised their original theories that attending to differences was somewhat harmful (as evidenced in the baseline provided by controls) to

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[4] We took considerable care in our debriefing procedures to ensure that all participants left the studies feeling positively about their relationships. In Study 1, we explained that conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and that how couples handle conflict (whether through engagement or avoidance) is critical for feelings of satisfaction. In Study 2, we emphasized that similarities are indeed an integral part of good relationships while also noting that intimates are often unaware of their differences on dimensions critical for satisfaction. Further details regarding the debriefing procedures are available from the authors.

Table 2
Restructuring Indices for Study 2

Dependent measure	Experimental		Control		Differences pretest		Condition		Interaction	
	M	SD	M	SD	F	dfs	F	dfs	F	dfs
Intimacy-differences theories[a]	5.66	1.33	4.81	1.12	1.92	1, 62	5.10**	1, 62	1.85	1, 61
Confidence in intimacy[b]	6.42	1.38	7.03	1.08	39.69****	1, 61	3.21*	1, 61	0.03	1, 60
Perceived differences[a]	5.10	1.28	4.25	1.00	72.51****	1, 62	10.13***	1, 62	0.00	1, 61
Additional details										
Defensive reconstrual[a]	1.00	0.92	0.45	0.77	0.33	1, 62	5.25**	1, 62	2.64	1, 61
Unequivocal defensive reconstrual[a]	1.00	0.92	0.23	0.56	1.26	1, 62	12.49****	1, 62	1.41	1, 61
Polarization of differences[c]	0.64	0.91	0.09	0.29	6.63**	1, 48	5.25**	1, 48	1.63	1, 47
Embellishment of differences[a]	0.32	0.59	0.06	0.25	0.01	1, 62	4.52**	1, 62	0.59	1, 61
Deemphasis of differences[a]	0.12	0.41	0.48	0.85	0.35	1, 62	3.81*	1, 62	1.65	1, 61
Embellishment of similarities[a]	0.74	1.21	0.16	0.45	0.06	1, 62	5.84**	1, 62	0.15	1, 61
Intimacy narratives										
Differences as facilitators[a]	2.03	1.99	0.61	1.23	0.05	1, 62	10.06***	1, 62	0.01	1, 61
Global declarations of differences[a]	1.79	1.84	0.23	0.67	0.05	1, 62	17.62****	1, 62	0.21	1, 61
Embellishment of differences[a]	0.79	1.07	0.03	0.18	1.59	1, 62	11.61***	1, 62	1.31	1, 61

[a] $N = 65$. [b] $N = 64$. [c] $N = 51$.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

emphasize the importance of recognizing differences in promoting intimacy.

Confidence in Intimacy

By depicting little awareness of differences as an impediment to intimacy, we expected to threaten experimental participants' positive convictions in the level of intimacy in their relationships. The regression analysis on the confidence index ($\alpha = .69$) revealed a marginal effect for condition. As expected, the article appeared to dampen threatened subjects' confidence in the degree of intimacy in their relationships; they tended to feel less secure and close to their partners than control subjects.[5]

Perceived Differences Questionnaire

We expected threatened individuals to claim awareness of a wide range of subtle differences in their efforts to lessen the inconsistency posed by their revised theories. We averaged participants' responses to the perceived differences and similarities items to create a single index of claimed awareness of differences ($\alpha = .83$). The regression analysis on this measure yielded significant main effects for pretest differences and condition. First, supporting the validity of the perceived differences pretest, high-differences individuals claimed greater awareness of differences than low differences individuals. More importantly, threatened individuals, in comparison to controls, perceived more differences and fewer similarities across a variety of domains.

As the preceding analyses suggest, focusing on the importance of recognizing differences appeared to induce a more diffuse, less dismissable threat to the integrity of even high-differences individuals' narratives than was achieved in Study 1. We turn next to an examination of the open-ended process measures—the additional details, new examples, and intimacy narratives. We hoped that examining these measures would shed light on the construal processes underlying individuals'

construction of relationship-affirming narratives centered around their awareness of differences.

Providing Additional Details to the Original Examples

The salient emphasis on similarities in threatened individuals' original examples likely presented a provoking contradiction to their desired narratives. We expected these individuals to redress this inconsistency by engaging considerable poetic licence to weave this data into evidence supporting their awareness of differences.

Defensive reconstrual. In an effort to support a revised claim that they were indeed aware of important differences, experimental participants could depict certain similarities as encapsulating subtle differences. As expected, threatened individuals were more likely than controls to reconstrue their similarities as reflecting some degree of underlying difference. A closer examination of the nature of defensive reconstrual among experimental and control participants also revealed an intriguing qualitative disparity. Threatened individuals were more likely to encapsulate subtle, often important, differences within similarities and then to describe these differences quite unequivocally. In contrast, control participants tended to downplay the significance of such differences. Examples of threatened subjects' unequivocal depiction of differences included

> We are of similar intellectual ability [original] . . . however, *when it comes to using this ability I like to spend more time on my schoolwork than she does or than she would have me do* [detailed].

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[5] We did not find very strong evidence of dampened feelings of confidence in either study. We are not particularly troubled by these findings because threatened subjects had already begun to tell their desired, confidence-bolstering stories when they completed this measure.

We both feel insecure about starting a relationship because of past experiences [original] . . . both my partner and I feel compelled to make our relationship work because of negative past experiences; *although we differ in that her fear is loneliness while mine is rejection* [detailed].

Polarization. To rid themselves of any nagging feelings of doubt instilled by the manipulation, experimental participants might also amplify or mushroom existing differences by suggesting that certain differences were more profound than they originally described. Threatened individuals did indeed polarize their differences to a greater extent than control subjects. As we expected, high-differences threatened individuals were far more likely to mushroom their existing differences ($M = 1.00$) than either low-differences threatened individuals ($M = 0.09$) or controls ($M = 0.09; 0.09$). Although the regression analysis was not sensitive to this interaction pattern, because of extremely low variance in three cells, a 2×2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded the anticipated interaction, $F(1, 47) = 6.29$, $p < .05$. Instances of such mushrooming of differences among high differences threatened subjects included:

Differences between attitudes toward drinking alcohol [original] . . . *this reveals that she is a little more wanting to let loose whereas I feel I am a more conservative person* [detailed].

Personalities as to mood swings are not similar, or social habits [original] . . . *"I have a view that if I'm happy everything is fine. My partner feels that at times anger is necessary to fuel the relationship and make it work. I do not enjoy arguing whereas his mood swings and social habits (depressive drinker) are not to my liking. Thus, the dissimilarities in our attitudes or personalities are extreme* [detailed].

Embellishment of differences. We suggested earlier that poetic licence might also extend to intimates' impressions of which of their partners' faults and virtues are even relevant to the well-being and maintenance of their relationships. Threatened individuals, in comparison to controls, were the most likely to emphasize how attending to certain differences enhanced their positive feelings about the degree of intimacy in their relationships. Such linking of differences to the well-being of the relationship was reflected in this example:

His views on important issues are the same as mine but he seems more firm in his beliefs [original] . . . I can see that he is very consistent with his feelings and attitudes and *therefore this makes it much easier for me to understand him and the reasons for his feelings and attitudes; it also makes me assess and understand myself* [detailed].

Deemphasis of differences. In contrast to experimental participants' emphasis on the central role differences played in promoting intimacy in their relationships, control participants tended to cast their differences in a relatively tangential role, although this effect was only marginally significant, $p < .06$. Comments such as "I like talking a lot about us. . . he is quiet a lot [original]. . . . Actually, *in general I talk a lot about anything so that is probably why he is more quiet"* [detailed] reflected control subjects' penchant for downplaying the significance of their differences.

Embellishment of similarities. The plethora of similarities in threatened individuals' original examples presented a potential impediment to their desired stories because the salience of similarities highlighted the threatening possibility that they were impeding intimacy by idealizing their partners. We expected individuals to compensate for this potential threat by embellishing the significance of their similarities in promoting intimacy (Brickman, 1987). The analysis of positive embellishment of similarities showed that experimental participants did indeed link their similarities to feelings of closeness, security, and warmth. Such evidence of compensation is reflected in this example:

Similar in views of our families [original] . . . we both feel they are important in shaping our lives and yet both of us have great conflict with members of our families and *this leads to more bonding between us"* [detailed].

New Examples

We expected threatened individuals to differentially recall new differences and suppress similarities to provide further support for their claims. Contrary to our hypothesis, they were not more likely to selectively retrieve more differences or fewer similarities in order to bolster their stories about the prevalence of differences in their relationships.

Intimacy Narratives

To this point, we have hypothesized that threatened individuals' desire to construct stories centered around differences guided their construal of particular instances of similarities and differences. Our examination of their intimacy narratives should shed light on whether such stories emerged from this process of reconstrual and redefinition.

Threatened individuals dramatically restructured their stories of the development of intimacy to emphasize the central role played by their awareness of differences. Their narratives contained the greatest focus on how their knowledge of their differences facilitated intimacy, especially as indexed by their simple, global declarations of such awareness (e.g., "We believe in many of the same things; however, we are very different people. I feel we are both aware of these differences"). (An examination of the number of statements depicting differences as impediments yielded no significant effects.) In their depiction of the role of differences in their relationships, threatened subjects also mushroomed simple references to the intimacy-promoting nature of their attention to differences by explicitly linking such awareness to enhanced feelings of closeness and security (e.g., "Because we have recognized and negotiated the differences, this is why our relationship is so strong, and the closeness keeps growing").[6]

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[6] Experimental participants exhibited greater variances than control subjects on many of the categorical indices for additional details, new examples, and intimacy narratives; this heterogeneity often resulted from very low condition means. However, nonparametric analyses of the condition main effects (Mann-Whitney U or Wilcoxon Rank Sum W Test) also revealed consistent, significant results, suggesting that this heterogeneity was not responsible for the findings. No significant condition effects or pretest differences by condition interactions were found for offensive reconstrual, polarization of similarities, meaning consistent elaboration of similarities and differences, negative embellishment of similarities and differences, or deemphasis of

Discussion

Consistent with the findings from Study 1, threatened individuals defused the possibility of a serious fault in their relationships through a social constructionist process that turned this possible fault into a virtue. This transformation process was evident both in their responses on the scaled index of perceived differences and in their depictions of the development of intimacy in their relationships. As discussed, threatened individuals reoriented their stories around their many virtues in recognizing their differences.

Study 2 also sheds considerable light on the particular construal processes that underlie this transformation process. To redress the provoking inconsistency posed by the salience of similarities in their original examples, threatened individuals appeared to take considerable licence in their reinterpretation of the meaning of these examples. They perceived differences in apparent similarities and polarized existing differences. Reinterpreting the meaning of available evidence therefore appears to play an integral role in the process of weaving seemingly immutable data into a desired story.

In contrast, selective recall appeared to be less central to the constructive process, as threatened individuals did not selectively recall new differences or suppress similarities. However, the role of selective retrieval in supporting desired conclusions has been clearly documented in other research (e.g., Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989; M. Ross, McFarland, & Fletcher, 1981; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). In the present study, the order of the dependent variables may have undercut this measure as individuals provided new examples after they had already reconstrued their original examples as evidence of their differences. Thus, their motivation to provide further supporting evidence for their claims may have already been diminished.

We suggested earlier that interpretive licence in construal processes may also extend to intimates' perceptions of which of their partners' virtues and faults are even relevant to the success of their relationships. Indeed, threatened individuals actively embellished the intimacy-promoting nature of their differences, presenting a sharp contrast to control participants' active denial of the significance of their differences. Thus, what was once a fault—as evidenced in control participants' attempts to dismiss their differences—became a virtue. As we suggested initially, intimates might also compensate for the specter of faults in their partners or relationships by embellishing virtues (cf. Brickman, 1987). Consistent with this reasoning, threatened individuals, in their provision of additional details, appeared to compensate for their possible inattention to differences by explicitly affirming how their similarities promoted intimacy.

In Study 2, we attempted to push the boundaries of a social constructionist perspective by allowing participants to freely generate and then commit themselves to a pool of specific examples centered around similarities. As the foregoing discussion illustrates, threatened individuals largely reconstrued this

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similarities. In the intimacy narratives, no significant effects were found for statements related to the absence of differences, statements related to the presence or absence of similarities, or embellishment of similarities.

seemingly incontrovertible evidence of their similarities as evidence of their differences. Thus, the ability to construct a desired narrative is not limited to individuals' introspective piecing together of fragmented memories and impressions, as Study 1 might suggest. Instead, interpretive licence extends even to intimates' construal of public, self-generated, seemingly immutable data. Also speaking to the particular power of motivation to overwhelm apparent data constraints, claimed disparities in the availability of differences did not consistently moderate the type of story that threatened intimates told. With the exception of polarization of differences, high-differences and low-differences participants did not differ in how they fashioned available data and introspections into narratives embellishing their awareness of differences. Such results attest to the proposition that a piece of data—particularly, a negative feature of an intimate partner or relationship—does not appear to have one, unqualified meaning (e.g., Gergen et al., 1986). Rather, partner or relationship attributes take on shades of meaning that are dictated by the positive story an intimate is trying to tell.

General Discussion

Defusing Our Apparent Faults

To this point, we have argued that our manipulations introduced threatening negative elements into individuals' positive stories. We then interpreted the subsequent story restructuring as a reflection of individuals' desire to defuse the threat. Is it possible, though, that the narrative restructuring we observed reflected something quite different from individuals' response to a threat to their convictions?

For instance, perhaps introducing the articles unintentionally confounded cognitive salience with threat. In other words, reviewing articles on conflict and differences may have simply made these dimensions quite salient for experimental subjects. They may then have produced a more differentiated, cognitively transformed story, not because they were threatened, but simply because information about these topics was so readily available. However, we made every attempt to make the topics of conflict and differences just as salient for control subjects.

First, they spent several minutes completing the perceived conflict and differences questionnaires immediately before they wrote their narratives. These measures tapped their perceptions in these domains in considerable depth and therefore made the focal dimensions quite salient. In the preamble to control subjects' intimacy narratives, we also described the topic of the article, thereby ensuring that control subjects were focused on conflict or differences. In light of these precautions, differential salience seems a much less compelling explanation for the story restructuring. Furthermore, we observed transformations in a direction opposite to subjects' original theories and perceptions, suggesting that salience alone did not produce our results. After all, we found a marked emphasis on conflict in low-conflict individuals' stories, an effect exactly opposite to what a more extensive sampling of their conflict experiences would produce.

Perhaps, low conflict and few differences are actually measures of relationship quality. If this is the case, low-conflict individuals might have restructured their narratives, not be-

cause their partners fell furthest from the conflict-engaging ideal, but simply because they were in better, happier relationships than high-conflict individuals. In other words, low-conflict individuals may simply have cared more about preserving a positive image of their partners. In Study 1, however, satisfaction was independent of perceived conflict scores, $r(50) = .16$, suggesting that low-conflict individuals were not any happier than high-conflict individuals (cf. Braiker & Kelley, 1979). In Study 2, awareness of differences did tap relationship quality, as high-differences individuals generally reported less satisfaction, $r(63) = -.69$. Yet, even these individuals restructured their stories in ways that preserved their generally positive representations. We certainly believe that the happiest, most committed individuals will be the most motivated to dispel threats. However, satisfaction did not statistically moderate the results in either study when it was entered as a covariate, suggesting that our participants all cared enough to need to defuse the threat.

In posing a threat to individuals' convictions, we changed their a-priori theories about the qualities that are desirable in an intimate partner. Therefore, it is possible that the story restructuring we observed simply reflected threatened individuals' desire to portray their relationships in a socially desirable light. In considering this threat to our interpretation of the results, it is critical to consider the intended audience for threatened individuals' revised narratives. If participants were striving to present a desirable account to themselves, this of course mirrors our contention that individuals need to believe the best of their partners.

On the other hand, if subjects were simply striving to "keep up appearances" and present a socially desirable account to the experimenter, this would certainly present a rival explanation for our findings. However, threatened individuals had numerous ways to do this apart from simply shaping their reports in the manner suggested by the articles. In their stories, they could have emphasized the many other ways in which their partners facilitated intimacy. Also, if presenting a desirable public image was their sole motivation, they would have wanted to avoid appearing inconsistent from the pretest to posttest, and most critically, they would not have described themselves as being less confident about the level of intimacy in their relationships.

Furthermore, if social desirability concerns were driving the effects in Study 1, high-conflict individuals could have easily emphasized conflict in their narratives. After all, they did depict their partners as rarely initiating disagreements over joint interests. Therefore, they should have been quite motivated to portray their relationships in a more desirable fashion if the audience was not a private, but a public one. However, high-conflict threatened individuals did not restructure their stories even though they could have easily impressed the experimenter by embellishing the amount of conflict in their relationships.

Finally, we also took a number of precautions to minimize any potential experimental demands. We emphasized throughout the experiment that we were interested in subjects' critical evaluation of the articles, thereby giving them explicit permission to reject them. We also stressed that we were interested in what made participants' relationships unique. We even concluded the articles with the caveat that partners may adjust to one another in ways quite different from those implied by the

articles. To further minimize any need to impress the experimenter, we also emphasized that subjects' responses were anonymous and would be examined only in the context of the group's responses. In light of the preceding arguments and these many precautions, social desirability seems to be a less than parsimonious explanation for the overall pattern of results.

In the spirit of this article, we feel that these potential faults should be viewed within the context of the greater virtues of our paradigm. Eliciting individuals' open-ended accounts allowed us to examine how individuals spontaneously restructured their stories in response to negativity. Relying only on our scaled measures, however, might have been more revealing of the story we wanted threatened individuals to tell. Finding such strong, consistent results across both scaled and open-ended measures should therefore attest to the strength and validity of our findings.

Maintaining Convictions: The Role of Defensive Strategies

We suggest that intimates' storytelling efforts culminate in complex, integrative narratives that sustain their positive convictions. A sense of conviction or confidence is usually conceptualized as reflecting an attitude that has an unequivocal affective core (cf. Fazio, 1986). This affective core conclusion, as embodied in feelings of love or satisfaction, has been the focus of most research on close relationships. However, little research has examined the cognitive structure (e.g., mental representation of a partner) supporting this affective core. As our focus on narrative structure would attest, we doubt this affective conclusion can exist in isolation. In fact, McGuire and Papageorgis (1961) argued that such evaluative truisms may be quite vulnerable to threat if there is no supporting cognitive structure underlying the affect.

We believe that intimates' narratives provide this supportive cognitive structure. In confidence-instilling narratives, negative attributes must either be transformed or refuted, not left dangling as loose ends within the story. The potential for considerable poetic licence in storytelling may underlie such positive transformations of apparent negativity. In both studies, individuals were able to weave even the most seemingly compelling evidence of negativity into stories supporting their desired, positive conclusions. We suspect that individuals' continued confidence in their partners—their sense of felt security—depends on their continued struggle to weave stories that depict potential faults in their partners in the best possible light.

Seeing virtues in apparent faults appears to be a primary mechanism for weaving confidence-instilling stories in the face of negativity. For instance, threatened individuals constructed stories depicting conflict-engaging partners despite interpersonal histories suggestive of conflict avoidance. Similarly, in Study 2, threatened individuals constructed evidence of differences in data attesting to similarities. Intriguingly then, negativity need not be fully, consciously acknowledged as intimates weave their desired stories. Instead, the desired conclusion may function as an interpretive filter that colors, preconsciously, the meaning of negative attributes or behaviors. This hypothesized process bears a strong similarity to the perceptual defense phenomenon (e.g., Erdelyi, 1974). The glimmer of a potentially neg-

ative attribute may pose a threat preconsciously. However, defensive construal processes may largely preempt intimates' full, conscious recognition of negativity. Rather, constructed virtues appear figural rather than potential faults.

Although our data cannot definitively address how individuals turned apparent faults into virtues, a number of possibilities exist. First, there are often few clear, unequivocal behavioral exemplars for abstract personal qualities, such as trustworthiness or assertiveness. So, for instance, individuals may sustain positive impressions of their partners' willingness to engage conflicts by constructing idiosyncratic definitions that depict their partners' behaviors as evidence of this desired quality (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Coupled with the ambiguity inherent in trait definitions, the meaning of behavior itself is often ambiguous. As a result, two individuals trying to sustain opposing conclusions about their partners' attributes may interpret apparently similar behaviors as evidence of these different, desired attributes (e.g., Gergen et al., 1986; Griffin & Ross, 1991). Thus, challenged individuals in Study 2 were able to reinterpret apparent similarities as evidence of their differences. Finally, revising the past may also enable individuals to see virtues where they once saw evidence of imperfections (Holmberg & Holmes, in press; McFarland & Ross, 1987). For example, individuals who are high versus low on conflict engagement may not always act in attribute-consistent ways from situation to situation (cf. L. Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Therefore, low-conflict individuals may construct images of conflict-engaging partners by remembering evidence of the virtue while suppressing evidence of the fault.

As a second general strategy for weaving faults into positive stories, individuals may also construct idiosyncratic theories about the relative importance of their partners' virtues and faults. By embellishing the significance of virtues and refuting the importance of faults, such personal theories maintain a consistent, positive theme in intimates' stories. For instance, threatened individuals maintained desired narratives by embellishing the significance of differences, whereas controls preserved positive narratives by dismissing the significance of these differences.

In their storytelling, individuals may relegate their partners' faults to the relatively tangential role dictated by their theories. In Study 1, low-conflict threatened individuals preserved the integrity of their narratives by constructing refutations and relationship-enhancing attributions that minimized the significance of their partners' conflict avoidance. By constructing such refutations, intimates constrained the possible implications of this fault, thereby minimizing any potential links between their partners' conflict avoidance and their capacity to be good partners.

Individuals might also obscure imperfections simply by construing their partners' virtues in an even more positive light (cf. Brickman, 1987). For instance, threatened individuals in Study 2 were significantly more likely to embellish the value of their similarities for strengthening intimacy, as a counterpoint to the threat that they were not sufficiently aware of their differences. Similarly, research on compensation and self-interpretation suggests that individuals do indeed try to embellish their personal virtues to make up for perceived faults (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). Essentially, inti-

mates may come to understand specific faults in the light of greater, more significant virtues that take the sting away from these imperfections (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

Such defensive transformations of the meaning and significance of apparent faults may foster intimates' construction of idealized stories or "positive illusions" about one another. Individuals may discover new, previously unrecognized virtues as they struggle to deal with one another's imperfections. For instance, low-conflict individuals discovered their partners' many important virtues around conflict engagement precisely because of their concerns about their partners' conflict avoidance. Similarly, as a counterpoint to the threat that they were simply idealizing their partners, threatened individuals in Study 2 discovered significant new virtues in recognizing differences. Individuals' struggle to deal with their own imperfections may also lead them to see even greater virtues in their partners. For example, individuals seem to defuse doubts posed by their own attraction to desirable others by disparaging the attractiveness of these potential mates (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Individuals' own partners may then appear especially attractive and desirable in light of such unattractive alternatives. Paradoxically then, positive representations of a partner may prosper—not in spite of a partner's negative qualities—but precisely because of these imperfections (e.g., Brickman, 1987).

Construal and Catastrophe: A Latent Vulnerability?

To be resilient, individuals' stories must be capable of adapting to the challenges of their relationships' development. If positive affect is to be maintained over time, cogent narratives must evolve that realistically integrate the positive and negative aspects of intimates' experiences.

As a primary response to the specter of negativity, committed dating partners may construct compelling stories that depict their intimates in the best possible light. Intimates' conviction in such stories may guide construal such that information processing serves a maintenance function. Individuals are potentially buffered from swings in emotion as a benign interpretation of negativity is largely predetermined. Defusing or minimizing faults in this way may also bolster feelings of efficacy by preventing intimates from construing faults as insurmountable. Thus, rather than inhibiting action, these narratives may provide intimates with sufficient hope and security to work negativity through interpersonally.

However, the reconstrual of negativity within narratives may also create the potential for catastrophe, leaving intimates vulnerable to a resurfacing of negative elements. As our theory would anticipate, individuals typically ignore apparent negativity and make decisions to marry largely on the basis of their positive feelings about their partners. In fact, apparent negativity, such as premarital conflict, is relatively orthogonal to feelings of love and satisfaction prior to and at the point of marriage (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985; Markman, 1979). However, masking negativity in this way is not without its potential costs if individuals then fail to deal directly with troublesome issues. For instance, conflict and negativity before marriage, although initially divorced from reports of satisfaction, predict later declines in satisfaction (Kelly et al., 1985; Markman, 1981).

Whether integrative storytelling effectively defuses negativity over the longer term may depend on the fragility of the constructions. If a story appears to belie social reality constraints, the narrative woven around the negative attribute may unravel as evidence inconsistent with the individual's construction intrudes again and again. For example, if a fault in a partner is blatantly denied and transformed into a virtue, an individual may be quite vulnerable to the challenge posed by recurring evidence of this negative attribute. The construction of refutations that acknowledge but compartmentalize faults may prove more resilient to the resurfacing of negativity. Obviously, the utility of these defensive strategies—whether they ultimately bolster positivity or provide the basis for the relationship's eventual disintegration—remains a question for future research.

Our focus on the critical importance of efforts to accommodate to negativity mirrors recent attention given to the role of negativity in predicting relationship success (e.g., Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Rusbult et al. argued that avoiding destructive responses to negativity may ultimately be far more important for relationship satisfaction than attempting to maximize positive behaviors. Similarly, Huston and Vangelisti found that initial negativity in socioemotional behavior was the strongest predictor of declines in satisfaction among newly married couples two years into marriage.

Dealing with negativity may prove to be one of the greatest challenges in sustaining romantic relationships. As the above research (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Rusbult et al., 1991) attests, intimates' positive convictions may begin to waver if negativity is recurrent and exceeds their capacity to assimilate it into positive stories. Once this equilibrium is disturbed and intimates' confidence starts to erode, they may begin to test whether the partner really is someone they can count on to be responsive and caring. Rather than maintaining convictions, construal processes may then begin to serve a self-protective function. In effect, intimates may become risk averse in their interpretations in order to protect themselves from the further dashing of their hopes. Such a hypothesis-testing strategy may well support the feared conclusion as intimates become much more sensitized to the possible implications of negativity and less confident in the implications of positivity (Holmes & Boon, 1990).

Intriguingly, the very fragility of relationships may rest on the flexibility inherent in the construal process itself. Brickman (1987), for example, couched his description of romantic love in terms of catastrophe theory (Flay, 1978). He argued that passionate love is created out of intense ambivalence through intimates' commitment to idealized depictions of their partners. However, as ambivalence is only masked, recurring negativity may trigger a dramatic decrease in love. We suggest that interpretive license is the basis for such polar swings in emotion.

Although our research has focused on how the ambiguity inherent in the construal process sustains positive convictions, interpretive license may also support more negative conclusions. For instance, if an intimate is motivated to believe the best of her or his partner, occasional stubbornness could be interpreted as a sign of fortitude and integrity. However, an intimate less motivated to be generous might construe the same

behavior as diagnostic of inconsiderateness and unresponsiveness. Thus, if feelings of doubt begin to erode positive convictions, intimates may find evidence of negativity in the same data that once supported positive stories. Such jaded interpretations may further escalate negative emotions. From a social-constructionist perspective, meaning may only be as lasting as the positive conclusion guiding the construal: If construals can be done, they can be undone with equal facility.

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