

When Flattery Gets You Nowhere: Discounting Positive Feedback as a Relationship Maintenance Strategy

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Intimates can rely on a number of strategies to protect their relationships from potential threats. In the present article, the authors investigate a new strategy: to discount flattering comments received from an attractive alternative to a dating partner by making a situational attribution. However, the authors did not expect everyone to adopt this strategy, as not everyone is likely sufficiently motivated to override both the tendencies to make dispositional attributions and to accept positive feedback from others. Dating and single participants were informed that an attractive alternative's positive impression of them had been made freely or under constraint. As expected, dating participants in the constraint condition were less likely than were those in the no-constraint condition to believe that the alternative's impression of them was genuine. In contrast, single participants believed that the confederate's impression of them was genuine, irrespective of their experimental condition. Self-esteem further moderated this effect. As hypothesised, only dating participants with low self-esteem were sufficiently motivated to recognise the situational constraint and discount the positive feedback. High self-esteem daters who were less inclined to discount the positive feedback instead protected their relationships by devaluing the alternative's attractiveness compared to singles.

Keywords: relationship maintenance, attribution, self-esteem, devaluation

Flattery will get you everywhere. . . or will it? Complimenting someone may generally be a good strategy for having your romantic interest reciprocated, but what if the recipient of one's flattering overtures is already in a romantic relationship? Would the receiver simply be flattered by the attention? Or would this person recognise the flattery as a threat to his or her relationship and be motivated to dispel this threat?

According to work on relationship maintenance (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), the availability of attractive alternatives can undermine one's motivation to maintain and sustain an intimate relationship. In this study, we go beyond existing research on relationship maintenance and turn to attribution theory in order to examine a new strategy that people can use when they not only meet an attractive alternative, but when they also receive flattering comments from the attractive alternative. We believe that dis-

counting flattering comments received from an alternative may be a viable way to defend one's relationship. However, we further reason that this strategy might not be suited for everyone; thus, we also examine whether different people might opt for different strategies when engaging in relationship defense.

Defending Against Attractive Alternatives

Research on relational maintenance has demonstrated that people in committed relationships engage in various strategies to defend against the threat of meeting attractive alternatives to their dating partners. People can respond by ignoring (Miller, 1997) or simply avoiding (Lydon, Burton, & Menzies-Toman, 2005) the attractive alternative. Such responses, however, are not always possible if one must interact with the attractive alternative on a regular basis because of shared activities such as work. In this case, another response might be to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative, that is, to rate the person's attractiveness lower than would a single person (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

One limitation to the typical paradigm used in the previous research on attractive alternatives was that participants were presented with a static target, for example, a picture possibly accompanied by a biographical sketch. Lydon and his colleagues (Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999) modified this paradigm by leading some participants to think that the attractive alternative was in fact attracted to them. Though this increased the level of threat, there was still no encounter with the alternative. Real world threats, however, often do involve an encounter with an attractive alternative. In such situations, the alternative's interest signals availability and increases his or her potential. Moreover, the interest of the alternative is self-esteem enhancing. It may well be more difficult to ward off such real world threats than the

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threats in a standard devaluation paradigm by relying exclusively on one relationship maintenance strategy, namely devaluation.

Multiple Strategies for Relationship Maintenance

To date, studies on reactions to alternative partners have provided participants with only one method of reducing the threat of the alternative. In reality, however, people have different options for dispelling a threat to their relationships (Menziez-Toman & Lydon, 2005), and it may be important to investigate how these various strategies are used differentially across people and circumstances.

We reasoned that multiple strategies might be available to individuals receiving compliments or advances from an attractive alternative to their romantic partners. Devaluing the alternative's attractiveness would certainly be a viable option in this situation. Another way intimates may protect their relationships in such a situation is to discount the alternative's positive behaviors. For example, how would a person react if a good-looking dentist told her that she had a nice smile? Given that most people like to believe good things about themselves, an immediate reaction might be to take this as a compliment. However, a person who is already in a romantic relationship may be more likely to think that the dentist said this because of his interest in dental hygiene rather than because he meant to be flirtatious. Discounting positive behaviors made by an available and attractive person of the opposite sex may be another strategy used by intimates to protect their commitment to their relationships.

We thus set out to investigate three important questions. First, are people motivated to discount the positive behaviors of attractive alternatives by finding alternate explanations for these behaviors? In addition, if people are able to discount these behaviors, do they still need to engage in other relationship maintenance behaviors such as devaluation of the attractive alternative? Finally, could there be individual differences at play in choosing which strategy to use in times of relationship threat? In order to answer these questions, an attributional perspective must first be considered.

Motivated Attribution

In judging the cause of someone's actions, the correspondence bias refers to the common error of overestimating the influence of the person's disposition and underestimating the impact of the situation (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). This tendency is so pervasive that it is also referred to as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977).

Recently, attention has shifted to a motivational explanation for the fundamental attribution error. A series of studies conducted by Ditto and his colleagues (Ditto, Scepansky, Munro, Apanovitch & Lockhart, 1998) shows that the fundamental attribution error is especially robust when it serves the self-interest of individuals.

In one study (Ditto et al., 1998, Study 1), male participants were presented with positive or negative feedback about their characteristics that supposedly had been written by another participant. This other participant was in reality a female confederate working for the experimenter. Some participants were told that the confederate had been instructed to write whatever she wished, whereas others were told that the confederate had been instructed only to comment on the participant's most desirable or undesirable char-

acteristics. Results indicated that when participants received positive feedback they were more likely to make a dispositional attribution about the other participant. That is, they believed that the other person genuinely liked them, even when they were told that the confederate's feedback was constrained to be positive. However, a different pattern emerged when the feedback was negative. Dispositional attributions were made when participants believed the negative feedback had been written freely, whereas more situational attributions were made when the feedback was constrained to be negative.

Such findings are consistent with the quantity of processing (QOP) view by Ditto and Lopez (1992). According to this view, individuals are only motivated to recognise the importance of the situation when considering information that they would prefer not to believe (preference-inconsistent information) as opposed to information that they do want to believe (preference-consistent information). This view is based on findings indicating that preference-consistent information is perceived as being more accurate and valid than preference-inconsistent information (Ditto et al., 1998), and on findings that negative information and negative affective states result in more detail-oriented and effortful cognitive processing (Bless et al., 1996; Mackie & Worth, 1989; Taylor, 1991). The QOP view brings these ideas together and shows that the tendency to more readily accept preference-consistent rather than preference-inconsistent information derives from the notion that preference-consistent information initiates less effortful cognitive analysis (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Ditto et al., 1998). Preference-inconsistent information, on the other hand, initiates more analysis, which could thus call into question the quality of the information and lead to the rejection of dubious information. With respect to the fundamental attribution error, Ditto and colleagues (1998) suggest that preference-inconsistent information provides the motivation required to form more effortful situational, rather than dispositional, attributions.

Thus, in the Ditto et al. (1998) study, participants receiving negative feedback were more motivated to engage in effortful scrutinizing of the feedback and to recognise the constraint of the situation as the feedback was preference-inconsistent. However, participants receiving positive feedback were less motivated to scrutinise the feedback as it was preference-consistent; thus, they failed to recognise the constraint.

It seems logical that positive feedback about oneself would be preference-consistent and be considered genuine given that people are generally motivated to seek out and interpret information about themselves in such a way as to bolster their positive views of themselves (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Sedikides, 1993). However, what might happen if this positive feedback came from an attractive alternative to one's romantic partner? Positive feedback from an attractive alternative might instead be interpreted as preference-inconsistent for those in romantic relationships because the idea that someone else likes them may pose a threat to the relationship. It is then plausible that individuals in a romantic relationship would be particularly motivated to attribute an attractive alternative's positive impression of them to the situation and not to their dispositions. To attribute the positive behavior to the attractive other's dispositions would increase the attractiveness and threat of the alternative. Thus, if given the opportunity, people in romantic relationships may be more motivated to discount this information

than would single people for whom positive feedback from an attractive person of the opposite sex would likely be welcomed.

Motivated Attributions as Relationship Maintenance: Who Will and Who Won't?

Discounting positive feedback received from an attractive dating alternative would require overriding the tendency to make dispositional attributions as well as the tendencies to believe positive information about the self and to reciprocate liking (Backman & Secord, 1959), meaning that the motivation to discount positive feedback about the self would have to be quite strong. It is doubtful that all dating intimates are motivated enough to override this fundamental attribution error.

Research on self-evaluation provides reason to believe that self-esteem may influence whether dating participants will ultimately discount positive feedback received from an attractive alternative in order to protect their relationships. Dysphoria and low self-esteem typically have been found to reduce self-enhancement motives (Brown, 1986; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982). In general, individuals with low self-esteem are less likely to positively distort information about themselves than individuals with high self-esteem (Silvera & Neilands, 2004). Moreover, people with negative self-views are more likely to seek relationship partners who view them negatively, verifying their own self-views (Swann, 1997). Once in a relationship, low self-esteem intimates also are more likely to underestimate their romantic partners' views of them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). It is therefore reasonable to think that low self-esteem individuals in dating relationships may be more likely than are high self-esteem individuals to engage in the effortful process of discounting positive feedback received from an attractive alternative. High self-esteem individuals in dating relationships, who are generally more motivated to believe that others think good things about them, may instead rely on a second line of defense to protect their relationships by devaluing the attractiveness of the alternative.

Current Study

Our first objective was to examine whether people in dating relationships would be motivated to discount the positive feedback received from an attractive alternative by recognizing that situational factors influenced the feedback. Our second objective was to see whether self-esteem would moderate this effect, with the expectation that dating individuals low in self-esteem would be more motivated to discount the positive feedback than would dating individuals high in self-esteem because such positive feedback should be more preference inconsistent for those low in self-esteem than for those high in self-esteem. Finally, our third objective was to see whether dating individuals would be more likely to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative if they failed to discount the positive feedback, either (1) because they were not provided with a situational explanation for the positive feedback, or (2) because they were high in self-esteem and overly motivated to believe the feedback despite a situational explanation for its positive nature.

To test these objectives, we used a modified version of Ditto and colleagues' (1998) paradigm. Under the guise of a "first-impressions" study, single and dating participants were invited to

judge the accuracy of another participant's written impression of them. In reality, this other participant was a confederate acting as an attractive alternative offering a favorable impression of the participants. Participants were informed that the confederate was either instructed to write whatever he or she wished (no-constraint condition) or to write only positive comments (constraint condition). We then assessed the extent to which participants believed the feedback reflected the confederate's genuinely positive impression of them, our attribution measure. We also assessed how participants evaluated the confederate's attractiveness, our evaluation measure.

Hypotheses for Objective 1

We first examined whether dating individuals would be more likely than would single individuals to discount the positive feedback received by an attractive alternative. We expected an interaction between participants' relationship status and their experimental condition (constraint vs. no-constraint) in determining whether participants would attribute the feedback to the confederates' true impression of them.

We hypothesized that dating participants in the constraint condition would be less likely to make dispositional attributions than would dating participants in the no-constraint condition. Dating participants in both conditions should perceive the flattering comments from the attractive alternative as preference-inconsistent; however, only those in the constraint condition were given the opportunity to dispel this threat by making a more situational attribution.

However, no such difference was expected for single participants. Singles in the constraint and the no-constraint conditions were expected to make attributions that are more dispositional. Singles should perceive the flattering comments as preference-consistent and thus those in the constraint condition should be motivated to overlook the constraint of the situation.

Hypotheses for Objective 2

We also examined whether the attribution results for dating participants would be qualified by self-esteem. Low self-esteem people see themselves negatively and expect others to see them negatively. In contrast, high self-esteem people see themselves favorably and expect others to see them favorably. We hypothesized that dating participants in the constraint condition would be less likely to make dispositional attributions than those in the no-constraint condition—but only if they were low in self-esteem. In contrast, dating participants high in self-esteem were expected to be just as likely to make dispositional attributions if they were in the constraint condition as if they were in the no-constraint condition.

Finally, self-esteem was not expected to moderate the results for single participants. Single participants in both the constraint and the no-constraint conditions were expected to perceive the feedback as preference-consistent because the confederate would not pose a relational threat, and consequently, they were expected to make dispositional attributions, irrespective of their self-esteem.

Hypotheses for Objective 3

Finally, we examined whether dating individuals who did not engage in discounting the positive feedback would instead devalue

the attractiveness of the alternative. Consistent with previous work on devaluation as a relationship maintenance mechanism, we first expected dating participants to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative compared to single participants. However, we expected this effect to be moderated by the situational constraints on the feedback and by self-esteem. In the constraint condition, dating participants who were high in self-esteem and who presumably failed to discount the positive feedback were expected to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative. Dating participants who were low in self-esteem and who presumably discounted the positive feedback were not expected to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative. Self-esteem was not expected to moderate the effect for dating participants in the no-constraint condition. Not having been given the opportunity to discount the positive feedback, participants in this condition were expected to devalue the attractiveness of the alternative irrespective of their self-esteem.

To summarise our hypotheses for objective 3, all groups of dating participants were expected to devalue the physical attractiveness of the confederate, except those dating participants low in self-esteem who were given the opportunity to defend their relationships by discounting the positive feedback they received from the confederate. Single participants, not motivated to undermine the attractive alternative, were not expected to discount the positive feedback or to devalue the physical attractiveness of the alternative.

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirty-one students, recruited through announcements made in various undergraduate classes, participated in a study supposedly pertaining to first impressions. Seven people had to be excluded from analyses due to suspicion, four were excluded because they were gay, and one was excluded because she was married. This left 119 participants: 60 females (M age = 19.8 years), 31 of whom were dating and 29 of whom were single, and 59 males (M age = 21.9 years), 34 of whom were dating and 25 of whom were single. For dating participants, the length of their relationships varied between 1 week and 9 years, with an average length of approximately 21 months. Participants received a movie pass worth \$8.75 or extra credit in a course for their participation.

Confederates

Two undergraduate students, one male and one female, were chosen to act as the attractive alternatives based on ratings of their physical attractiveness made by two female graduate students. The gender of the confederate was opposite to the gender of the participants. Both confederates were blind to the relationship status of the participants.

Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we adapted an experimental paradigm previously developed by Ditto et al. (1998). Our procedure comprised nine parts.

Part 1. In the first part of the experiment, interested participants were contacted by phone and told they would be taking part in a study on the “accuracy of first impressions” in which they

would meet another participant. They were told that their task in the study would be either to form an impression of the other participant or to judge whether the other participant’s impression of them was accurate.

They were then asked some background questions regarding their hobbies in order to add credibility to the cover story. Embedded in these questions was one item inquiring about the participants’ relationship status.

Part 2. Upon their arrival for their scheduled appointment, participants waited in the lobby where they met the second participant—an attractive student of the opposite sex. Unbeknownst to participants, this second participant was actually the male or female confederate.

The experimenter then greeted the “two” participants in the lobby, casually shaking their hands before asking to be followed to the laboratory. At this point, the confederate casually introduced himself or herself to the real participant by reaching out to shake hands and saying, “Hi, I’m _____.”

Part 3. Next, the availability of the confederate was introduced. Holding a clipboard that ostensibly contained information about the participants, the experimenter noted aloud that some information about the confederate was missing. Casually, the experimenter then asked whether the confederate was single or currently in a relationship. With a small smile, the confederate answered that he or she was single.

Part 4. In the fourth part, the experimenter informed the participants that they would be randomly assigned to one of two roles. The person assigned to the role of writer would be required to write his or her impression of the other person based on that person’s self-description. The person assigned to the role of judge would be given the other participant’s written impression of them and asked to rate its accuracy.

The experimenter then extended an envelope and explained that it contained two pieces of paper, one written “judge,” and the other written “writer.” The participant was invited to pick one of the pieces to see which role he or she would be assigned. In fact, the word “judge” was written on both papers because, unknowingly to the participants, all participants were assigned to be the judges.

Part 5. The experimenter then invited the participants to take a seat in two separate rooms. The real participant was asked to complete a brief questionnaire entitled the First Impressions Questionnaire in order to describe himself or herself. The participant was asked about various activities, hobbies, musical preferences, career goals, personal values, and attitudes about various social issues such as abortion. He or she was then informed that the other participant would be using these self-descriptions in order to form an impression of them.

Part 6. Once completed, the experimenter brought the questionnaire to the confederate in the other room. While the confederate supposedly wrote his or her impression, the participant was given a filler task. Rosenberg’s (1965) measure of self-esteem was embedded in this filler task.

Part 7. Following this, the experimenter returned with the confederate’s handwritten impression of the participant. The first page of the handwritten impression form contained instructions that the confederate supposedly followed while writing his or her impressions. These instructions, adapted from Ditto et al. (1998), contained the situational constraint manipulation.

Instructions. Participants were randomly assigned to the no-constraint or to the constraint condition. In the no-constraint condition, participants read that the confederate had been free to write a positive or a negative impression of them.

Comment on the four aspects of the other participant that you think best describe that person. These comments can be directed at things that you find desirable about the other participant, or things you find undesirable about the other participant. You should feel free to write whatever you wish.

In the constraint condition, participants read that the confederate had been forced to write a positive impression of them.

Comment only on what you perceive as this person's most desirable aspects. We realise that there may very well be things that you dislike about this person. . .but we ask that you limit your comments to those things that you found most desirable.

Written impressions. The written impressions were on the next page and consisted of four statements regarding the participant. These statements were hand-copied by the confederate from a standardised script. Impressions were always written to be positive.

For example, Participant #8 read the following written impressions:

First of all, his hobbies are extremely interesting. I also enjoy outdoor activities.

I like his taste in music. In general, I really like people who listen to pop.

I really think that his priorities are in the right place. I really like people who value enjoying life.

Finally, I really respect him for his attitudes.

The words in bold were directly drawn from the participants' self-descriptions in order to make these statements more believable to the participants.

Part 8. After reading the instructions to the confederate and the confederate's written impressions of the participants, participants completed the dependent variables questionnaires, which included questions regarding attribution and evaluation of the confederate's attractiveness. They were told that these questions were designed to assess their thoughts about the other participant and that person's written impressions of them.

Part 9. At the end of the experiment, as a manipulation check, participants were asked to recall what the writer's instructions had been. Based on their answers, the experimenter rated the accuracy of the participants' recollection on a scale of 1 (*does not know what the instructions were*) to 9 (*perfectly recalls the instructions*). The median rating for this measure was 9 ($M = 7.49$ and $SD = 2.56$).

Materials

First Impressions Questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they enjoyed certain activities (e.g., meeting new people, travelling, going to the cinema, etc.), to list their hobbies, to indicate their musical preferences, to list their career goals, and to rate certain personal values (e.g., freedom, loyalty, social justice) and attitudes (e.g., abortion, premarital sex,

animal testing). The purpose of this questionnaire was to use some of this information to generate the confederate's written impressions of the participants. In doing so, the confederate always chose the participant's first listed hobby, anything in the music category listed under "Other" (otherwise chosen from those checked off), and the personal value with the highest rating.

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess self-esteem, $\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.82$, $SD = .68$, $Mdn = 3.90$. The median was used in order to separate participants into low ($n = 62$) and high ($n = 56$) self-esteem groups.¹

Attribution measure. Attribution was measured using two questions from Ditto et al. (1998): "How do you think the other person feels about you as a person?" on a scale from 1 (*strong disliking*) to 9 (*strong liking*), and "Do you think that what this person wrote about you is in fact what that person really believes?" from 1 (*does not reflect what she or he thinks at all*) to 9 (*perfectly reflects what she or he thinks*). These two questions were positively correlated, $r = .34$, $p < .01$, and aggregated to form our measure of attribution. Higher scores indicated that participants believed the confederate's impression of them was genuine.²

Evaluation measure. Four items were used to assess the extent to which participants found the confederate attractive: "To what extent is the other participant attractive?," "In general, to what degree are you attracted to this person?," "All things considered, to what extent do you think this person would be an appealing romantic partner?," and "How interested would you be in going out on a date with this person?" Participants indicated their responses on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). Lower scores on this evaluation measure indicated greater devaluation of the dating alternative's attractiveness. The internal reliability for the evaluation measure was equal to .82.

Results

The two dependent variable measures, attribution and evaluation, were significantly correlated, $r(116) = .30$, $p < .01$. We therefore conducted a 3-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with condition (constraint vs. no-constraint), participant dating status (single vs. dating) and self-esteem (high vs. low) as the independent variables and the attribution and evaluation measures as the dependent variables. Following the recommendation of Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), we then used the Roy-Bargmann stepdown analysis to explore which significant main effects and interaction effects influence which dependent variables. In the Roy-Bargmann stepdown analysis, the dependent variable with the highest priority is assessed using a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the other dependent variable is assessed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the higher-priority variable treated as the covariate. In our analyses, we chose

¹ Self-esteem was not correlated to the two dependent variable measures, that is, the measures of attribution and of evaluation, $r_s = .10$ and $-.08$, respectively.

² Although we directly drew our attribution measure from Ditto et al. (1998), the low correlation between the two items suggests that the internal reliability of our attribution measure was somewhat weak, which could undermine our ability to detect reliable differences consistent with our hypotheses.

the attribution measure as the higher-priority dependent variable given that this is a new measure of defensive mechanism to the close relationship literature.

The three-way MANOVA yielded a significant main effect for participant dating status, $F(2, 108) = 5.89, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .10$. There were no other significant main effects, $F_s < 1$. The interaction between participant dating status and self-esteem was significant, $F(2, 108) = 3.42, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$. The participant dating status by condition and the condition by self-esteem interactions were marginally significant, $F_s(2, 108) = 2.89$ and $2.70, p_s < .07$ and $.08$, respectively, both $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$. The predicted 3-way interaction between participant dating status, condition, and self-esteem was significant, $F(2, 108) = 7.91, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .13$.

Whereas we had sufficient power to test our primary 3-way hypotheses, we unfortunately lacked sufficient power to formally investigate the role of gender in the context of a 4-way MANOVA. An exploratory 4-way MANOVA including gender as one of the independent variables revealed no significant effects of gender; however, future research is needed before we are able to draw any conclusions regarding the role of gender on the choice of relationship defense. Note, however, that the hypothesised three-way interaction between participant dating status, experimental condition, and self-esteem resulting from the 4-way MANOVA remained the same when using an unweighted means solution, allowing the number of males and females in each cell to contribute equally to each cell.

The following sections investigate the impact of the main effects and interaction effects on the individual dependent variables using the Roy-Bargmann Stepdown Analysis. We first report the results for the attribution measure and then report the results for the evaluation measure.

Attribution Results

The first objective of this study was to investigate whether dating participants in the constraint condition would be less likely than those in the no-constraint condition to make a dispositional attribution for the positive feedback they received from the attractive alternative. Single participants were not expected to differ in their dispositional attribution of the attractive alternative's positive feedback. A second objective was to determine whether self-esteem would further moderate this interaction.

In order to more specifically test our hypotheses regarding attribution, we followed up our 3-way MANOVA with a 2 (condition: constraint vs. no-constraint) \times 2 (participant dating status: single vs. dating) \times 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) univariate ANOVA with attribution as the dependent measure. Higher scores on the attribution measure indicated a more dispositional attribution (i.e., a greater belief that the positive feedback was genuine). Overall F_s were followed by planned contrasts using one-tailed t tests (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985).

First, none of the main effects were significant, $F_s < 1.71$. However, the hypothesised 2-way interaction between condition and participant dating status was significant, $F(1, 110) = 3.82, p = .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$. Focused comparisons revealed that, as expected, dating participants in the constraint condition were less likely to make dispositional attributions ($M = 6.65$) than were dating participants in the no-constraint condition ($M = 7.08$),

$t(110) = -1.92, p < .05$. There was no significant difference in attribution scores between the constraint and the no-constraint condition for single participants ($M_s = 7.11$ and 6.88 , respectively), $t(110) < 1$.

There was also a significant 2-way interaction between condition and self-esteem, $F(1, 110) = 4.84, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$. Participants with low self-esteem exhibited the expected pattern of making less dispositional attributions in the constraint condition ($M = 6.58$) than in the no-constraint condition ($M = 7.05$), $t(110) = -2.06, p < .05$. Participants with high self-esteem, however, did not differ in the extent to which they made dispositional attributions in the constraint condition ($M = 7.17$) compared to in the no-constraint condition ($M = 6.90$), $t(110) = 1.13, ns$. The participant dating status by self-esteem interaction was not significant, $F < 1$.

As predicted, the 3-way interaction between condition, participant dating status, and self-esteem was significant, $F(1, 110) = 10.50, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$. Focused comparisons revealed that participants who were in dating relationships and who were low in self-esteem were the only group who were less likely to make a dispositional attribution in the constraint condition ($M = 6.00$) than in the no-constraint condition ($M = 7.35$), $t(110) = -4.17, p < .01$. Dating participants who were high in self-esteem were as likely to make a dispositional attribution in the constraint condition ($M = 7.29$) as in the no-constraint condition ($M = 6.80$), $t(110) = 1.56, ns$. Finally, single participants, both low and high in self-esteem, were similar in making dispositional attributions in the constraint ($M_s = 7.16$ and 7.06 , respectively) and the no-constraint conditions alike ($M_s = 6.75$ and 7.00 , respectively), both $t_s < 1.24$. For a complete set of means, standard deviations, and cell sizes for this 3-way interaction, please refer to Table 1.

Evaluation Results

The third objective of this study was to investigate whether dating participants who did not protect their relationships by discounting the positive feedback would instead devalue the attractiveness of the alternative. In our analyses, dating participants were said to have devalued the alternative if their attractiveness evaluations were significantly lower than those given by single participants. In order to test this, we followed up the 3-way MANOVA with a 2 (condition: constraint vs. no-constraint) \times 2 (participant dating status: single vs. dating) \times 2 (self-esteem: high vs. low) ANCOVA with the evaluation measure as the dependent variable and the attribution measure as the covariate. Preliminary analyses revealed that the attribution measure did not interact with any of the independent variables in predicting devaluation.

The attribution measure was positively related to the evaluation measure, $F(1, 108) = 6.39, p = .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$. The hypothesised main effect for participant dating status was significant, $F(1, 108) = 11.21, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$, indicating that dating participants ($M = 5.58$) gave the alternative significantly lower attractiveness evaluations than did single participants ($M = 6.46$). The main effects for condition and self-esteem were not significant, $F_s < 1$.

The 2-way interaction between participant dating status and self-esteem was significant, $F(1, 108) = 6.12, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$. Focused comparisons revealed that high self-esteem

dating participants ($M = 5.27$) devalued the confederate's attractiveness compared to high self-esteem single participants ($M = 6.79$), $t(108) = 4.07$, $p < .01$. However, low self-esteem dating participants ($M = 5.90$) did not significantly devalue the confederate compared to low self-esteem single participants ($M = 6.13$), $t < 1$. None of the other 2-way interactions were statistically significant, $F_s < 1.88$.

Again, the predicted three-way interaction between condition, participant dating status, and self-esteem was significant, $F(1, 108) = 4.95$, $p < .05$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .04$. Focused comparisons revealed that low and high self-esteem dating participants in the constraint condition as well as high self-esteem dating participants in the no-constraint condition ($M_s = 5.66, 5.39, 5.14$, respectively) all rated the confederate as significantly less attractive than did their single counterparts ($M_s = 6.86, 6.67, 6.91$, respectively), all $t_s < -2.28$, all $p_s < .05$. Low self-esteem dating participants in the no-constraint condition ($M = 6.15$), however, did not differ in their attractiveness ratings of the confederates from low self-esteem single participants in the no-constraint condition ($M = 5.40$), $t(108) = 1.41$, *ns*. For a complete set of means, standard deviations, and cell sizes, for this 3-way interaction, please refer to Table 2.

Results Summary

In summary, our results indicate that, as we expected, dating participants in the constraint condition were less likely to make dispositional attributions than were dating participants in the no-constraint condition. However, this effect was specific to participants in dating relationships who had low self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals in dating relationships in both experimental conditions devalued the attractiveness of the confederate. Surprisingly, low self-esteem individuals in the constraint condition devalued in addition to discounting. The one group of dating participants who failed to defend their relationships were the low self-esteem dating participants who received positive feedback from the confederate in the no-constraint condition; they made dispositional attributions for the feedback (as expected), but then failed to devalue the attractiveness of the confederate.

Table 1
Means, Standard Errors, and Cell Sizes for the Attribution Measure as a Function of Condition, Relationship Status, and Self-Esteem

	Constraint condition			No-constraint condition		
	Dating					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
Low self-esteem	6.00	.24	14	7.35	.22	17
High self-esteem	7.29	.21	18	6.80	.23	15
	Single					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
	Low self-esteem	7.16	.21	19	6.75	.26
High self-esteem	7.06	.30	9	7.00	.24	14

Regression Analyses

Recognizing the limits of median-splits in dealing with continuous variables (MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002), we also analysed our data using multiple regressions. First, self-esteem was centered and participants' dating status and their experimental condition were dummy coded. The main effects of participant dating status, condition, and self-esteem were entered on the first step, the 2-way interaction terms were entered on the second step, and the 3-way interaction term was entered on the third step for both the attribution measure and the evaluation measure. Consistent with the results from the MANOVA, the hypothesised 3-way interaction was significant for both the attribution measure and the evaluation measure, $\beta = .58$, $t = 2.95$, $p < .01$, $sr = .26$ and $\beta = .55$, $t = 3.06$, $p < .01$, $sr = .25$, respectively.

Alternative Explanations

Given that the feedback received by the participants was highly positive, one might question whether the strength of this positive feedback might have obscured the constraint information. If this were the case, then perhaps participants who did not discount the constraint of the feedback failed to do so, not because they committed the fundamental attribution error, but simply because they never even noticed the feedback manipulation. However, this alternative explanation is unlikely given that the accuracy of participants' recollections of the writer's instructions (derived from the manipulation check question) did not vary according to the experimental condition, the participants' dating status, or their self-esteem, $t_s < 1.75$, *ns*. All results described in the previous section remained the same when the accuracy measure was included as a covariate. Reanalyzing the data, including only those who clearly understood the feedback did not change the results for the hypothesised 3-way interactions for the attribution and evaluation measures.

One might also wonder whether dating participants were more likely to discount the positive feedback because they were systematically lower in self-esteem than were single participants. How-

Table 2
Means, Standard Errors, and Cell Sizes for the Evaluation Measure as a Function of Condition, Relationship Status, and Self-Esteem

	Constraint condition			No-constraint condition		
	Dating					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
Low self-esteem	5.66	.39	14	6.15	.34	17
High self-esteem	5.39	.33	18	5.14	.36	15
	Single					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
	Low self-esteem	6.86	.32	19	5.40	.42
High self-esteem	6.67	.46	9	6.91	.37	14

ever, this was not the case as dating participants had nonsignificantly higher self-esteem than did single participants, $t = 1.38$, *ns*.

Finally, we also looked to see whether appraisals of the attractive alternative might have been related to the length of participants' dating relationships. Even though the attractiveness of the confederate was held constant for all opposite sex participants, dating participants in more established relationships may have evaluated the confederate differently than may have dating participants in shorter-term relationships. However, relationship length was not found to be related to the evaluation measure, $r(61) = -.03$, *ns*.

Discussion

All of our predictions for objectives 1 and 2 were supported. First, results indicated that overall dating participants in the constraint condition were less likely to make dispositional attributions for the confederate's positive feedback than were dating participants in the no-constraint condition. Single participants, however, made dispositional attributions whether they were in the constraint or in the no-constraint condition. Further, the results for attribution were moderated by self-esteem. That is, only those dating participants who were low in self-esteem discounted the confederate's feedback in the constraint condition. Dating participants with high self-esteem did not make dispositional attributions for the feedback in the constraint condition. Finally, single participants in both the constraint and no-constraint conditions were equally likely to make dispositional attributions, irrespective of their self-esteem.

Our results for attribution support Ditto and Lopez's (1992) QOP Hypothesis in that only those participants for whom the confederate's positive feedback was preference-inconsistent were able to recognise the situational constraint, and thus to discount the feedback. As we predicted, it seems that both the motivation to defend one's relationship against the threat of an attractive alternative and the motivation to confirm negative self-views were required to enable the more careful processing of the instructions given to the confederate in writing his or her impression, leading to less dispositional attributions of the feedback. Our results confirm that the fundamental attribution error is indeed quite robust. Neither being in a dating relationship nor having low self-esteem alone were enough for the feedback to be discounted in the constraint condition.

Results for the third objective partially supported our hypotheses. We replicated past research in finding that overall, dating participants devalued the confederate's attractiveness relative to single participants. Moreover, this effect was moderated by both situational constraint and self-esteem. High self-esteem dating participants both in the constraint and the no-constraint conditions devalued the confederate, as expected. Neither of these groups had discounted the confederate's feedback, either because they were not given the opportunity or because they presumably lacked the necessary motivation required to overcome the fundamental attribution error and the desire for self-enhancement. Instead, they relied on devaluation as a second strategy to defend their relationships against the threat of an attractive alternative. Unexpectedly, however, low self-esteem dating participants in the no-constraint condition who had no opportunity to discount the feedback also did not devalue the confederate. Further, low self-esteem dating participants in the constraint condition did devalue, even though they had already discounted the confederate's feedback.

Taking the attribution and devaluation results together, it seems that low self-esteem dating participants exhibited an "all or nothing" pattern of relationship maintenance. They either defended their relationships or they did not. Why might this be? It could be that people with low self-esteem are more likely than high self-esteem people to both doubt and crave positive feedback (Murray, Holmes & Collins, 2006). The literature on self-verification suggests that people with low self-esteem may doubt positive feedback if it goes against their negative self-views (e.g., Swann, 1990, 1997). However, it is also plausible that people with low self-esteem are extremely eager to receive positive feedback that they are given no reason to doubt and may thus experience a stronger affective reaction to such positive feedback (without constraint) than would people with high self-esteem.

In the context of our study, when given a reason to doubt the sincerity of the positive feedback, it was low self-esteem individuals in dating relationships who recognised this detail and discounted the positive feedback. Why would dating participants low in self-esteem devalue after having already discounted the positive feedback? We suspect that having recognised the situational constraint on the confederate's feedback, and then having surmised that the confederate did not have a genuinely positive view of them, low self-esteem individuals could have assumed that the confederate actually held a negative impression of them. Research on self-esteem and self-presentation indicates that in such situations, those low in self-esteem will be especially prone to denigrate the source of negative feedback (Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989).

Interestingly, the other side to the self-presentation research is that people who are low in self-esteem are especially likely to praise sources of positive feedback. This is consistent with the responses of low esteem dating participants in the no-constraint condition who did not devalue the confederate, thus failing to dispel the threat of the attractive alternative. Low self-esteem individuals then may cling to being liked and reciprocate the liking rather than devalue the source of such positive feedback.

Although the findings for people low in self-esteem are intriguing, the findings for people high in self-esteem underscore the multiple strategies available in the relationship cognition toolbox (Lydon, Burton, & Menzies-Toman, 2005). Some people in some situations will seize upon discounting as a way to quell the threat of flattery from an attractive person. Others can effectively employ a second strategy of denigrating the flatterer. So whereas it is true that, in our study, high self-esteem dating individuals ignored constraint information and fell prey to the fundamental attribution error, they were able to use a corrective strategy of devaluing the source of the flattering communication.

One limitation of this study is that the attractiveness and availability of the confederate was constant across conditions. A less attractive or unavailable confederate presumably would reduce the threat posed to those in dating relationships. A reduction in relationship threat decreases the devaluation effect by those in intimate relationships (Lydon, Fitzsimmons, & Naidoo, 2003). In the same way, a reduction in relationship threat might sufficiently decrease the motivation of low self-esteem dating individuals to scrutinise the positive feedback they receive.

A second limitation of this study involves its generalizability to other cultures. When making attributions for an individual's behavior, people from collectivist cultures are less likely to make dispositional attributions than those from more individualist cul-

tures (e.g., Lee, Hallahan, & Herzog, 1996; Miller, 1984). We can imagine then that in a collectivist culture, we might find dating individuals would recognise the situational constraint and discount the positive feedback irrespective of their self-esteem. Single people in collectivistic cultures might still be motivated to ignore the constraint information because of the positive effects of flattery (Krull, Loy, Lin, Wang, Chen, & Zhao, 1999). Of course, our speculation here is simplified and does not fully account for the large number of ways in which cultural differences (e.g., on flattery, courtship, arranged marriages) are likely to influence the pattern of results we obtained in this study.

Third, we were limited in our ability to test individual differences in relationship commitment as a possible moderator of attributions and devaluation. We administered a 1-item commitment measure by telephone, but it proved limited and insensitive.³ Future research would do well to administer a validated commitment scale to participants prior to an experimental testing session. Just as self-esteem detected the personal motivation to scrutinise positive feedback, commitment should detect differences in the relationship motivation to scrutinise positive feedback.

Conclusion

Flattery is a powerful and robust way to elicit liking from others. In fact, it is so compelling that under most circumstances people will even ignore plausible alternative explanations for flattering comments or advances. Despite its powerful influence, however, we have seen that relationship motives can actually trump flattery. Almost all groups of dating participants in our study were able to defend their relationships despite the strong desire to receive positive feedback as well as to reciprocate liking. People in relationships who are predisposed to question and scrutinise flattering overtures of others are able to discount the genuineness of such positive, enticing presentations. Moreover, those who do not discount such presentations are able to temper the romantic appeal of the flatterer. Nevertheless, there are those in relationships who so crave affirmation from others that they are at the mercy of flattery when not provided with a good reason to discount it, despite the potential costs to their current relationship. Woe to a flatterer who successfully woos such an individual.

Résumé

Les personnes entretenant une relation intime peuvent avoir recours à diverses stratégies afin de protéger leur relation contre des dangers potentiels. Dans le présent article, une nouvelle stratégie est examinée : amoindrir la valeur des commentaires flatteurs d'un troisième intervenant qui est attrayant aux yeux du partenaire au moyen d'une attribution situationnelle. Nous ne nous attendions pas à ce que tous adoptent cette stratégie puisque tout le monde n'est pas suffisamment motivé pour contrer à la fois la tendance à faire des attributions dispositionnelles et la tendance à accepter des commentaires positifs. Des participants – couples informels et célibataires – ont été informés que l'impression positive exprimée à leur égard avait été formulée sans contrainte ou avec contrainte. Comme on s'y attendait, les participants en couple informel ayant fait l'objet d'un commentaire formulé avec contrainte étaient moins susceptibles de croire que l'impression formulée par le complice était sincère que ceux de la situation sans contrainte. En

revanche, les participants célibataires ont cru que l'impression du complice était sincère, peu importe la condition expérimentale. L'estime de soi a contribué à l'effet. Conformément aux hypothèses de départ, seuls les participants en couple informel ayant une faible estime de soi ont été suffisamment motivés à reconnaître la contrainte situationnelle et à diminuer l'importance du commentaire positif. Les participants en couple informel ayant une haute estime de soi, moins portés à diminuer l'importance du commentaire positif, ont plutôt protégé leur relation en dépréciant l'attrait du complice, en comparaison des participants célibataires.

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³ Specifically, to measure relationship commitment, participants were asked: "On a scale from 1 to 9, where 1 is equal to not at all and 9 is equal to completely, to what extent are you committed to your relationship right now?" This item was positively skewed with a mean equal to 7.38.

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