IDENTITY IN RELATIONSHIPS: ITS DEVELOPMENT AND ROLE IN DAILY LIFE

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Abstract

Close relationships are an essential aspect of our existence. However, maintaining meaningful, satisfactory, and long-lasting relationships can be challenging. Indeed, we often face difficult situations and make sacrifices in order to maintain them. Recent research suggests that for some individuals, their relationship may become centrally important to who they are (i.e., those high in *relationship identification*) and this helps them meet relationship challenges as they arise. Despite its importance for relationship maintenance, the reasons why individuals come to see their relationship as a core part of who they are have been largely unexplored. What types of relational experiences can change how the self is perceived in relation to a romantic partner or a friend? Theory and research in social psychology suggest that *interpersonal understanding* is critical, as it allows us to validate ourselves and worldviews. Consistent with this, I theorize that intimate interactions in which one feels understood may meet epistemic needs, which in turn may foster identification. That is, I propose that feeling understood by a romantic partner or a friend is a *specific* social experience essential to building a strong relational identity. In 5 studies using experimental, survey, and longitudinal methods, I examined whether understanding fosters identification with a specific relationship. In Study 1, I used a person-perception paradigm and found that participants perceived someone as more identified with their romantic relationship when partner understanding was high and partner caring was low rather than the reverse (low understanding, high caring). Study 2 extended these results by examining people in romantic relationships longitudinally. High levels of felt understanding predicted increased identification over time. I also examined the importance of feeling cared for and accepted, and showed that understanding was uniquely linked to relationship identification. Studies 3–5 experimentally manipulated felt understanding. Using the ease of retrieval paradigm, Study 3 revealed that

romantically-involved participants assigned to recall 9 instances of partner understanding, relative to those who were assigned to recall only 3 instances, perceived the task to be more difficult, which led them to feel less understood and less identified with their relationship. Study 4 extended these results to friendships: Participants reported being more identified with their friendships when it was easy (vs. difficult) to recall instances in which their friend understood them. Study 5 replicated this finding using a more direct manipulation of perceived understanding: Participants visualized a close friend being understanding or not. As expected, perceived understanding affected relationship identification. Finally, I provide evidence that relationship identification is important in daily life: Highly identified individuals did not allow daily negative events to impact their overall feelings about their relationship. Taken together, these studies provide compelling evidence that understanding increases relationship identification, and this, in turn, is important for coping with everyday challenges couples experience.

Résumé

Les relations interpersonnelles occupent une place importante au cœur de nos vies. Cependant, maintenir des relations significatives, satisfaisantes et durables peut s'avérer un réel défi. En effet, nous devons souvent affronter des situations difficiles et faire des sacrifices afin de les maintenir. Or, certaines personnes perçoivent leur relation comme une partie importante de qui elles sont. Cette représentation constitue une force motivationnelle importante qui favorise l'engagement de ces individus envers la relation en situation d'adversité. Malgré son importance, les raisons pour lesquelles les individus viennent à développer un fort sentiment d'identification à l'endroit d'une relation demeurent largement méconnues. Plusieurs théories et études en psychologie sociale suggèrent que se sentir compris est essentiel, car cette expérience nous permet de valider notre concept de soi (par ex., nos valeurs) et notre vision du monde. En m'appuyant sur ces travaux, je propose qu'une relation qui nous aide à mieux nous comprendre est plus susceptible de devenir un aspect central de notre identité. Cinq études, utilisant différentes méthodologies, suggèrent que se sentir compris amène les individus à percevoir leur relation comme une partie importante de leur identité. Les résultats de l'étude 1 ont révélé que les individus perçoivent une personne comme étant plus identifiée à sa relation si elle se sent fortement comprise par son partenaire. L'étude 2 visait à examiner l'association entre le fait de sentir compris et l'identification à une relation à travers le temps. Les résultats ont démontré que se sentir compris par son partenaire amoureux est lié à l'identification à la relation 8 mois plus tard. Cependant, se sentir accepté et apprécié par son partenaire n'était pas lié à l'identification de la même façon. L'objectif de l'étude 3 était de manipuler de façon expérimentale le sentiment d'être compris par un partenaire amoureux. Afin de manipuler ce sentiment, j'ai eu recours à l'heuristique de disponibilité, soit la tendance des individus à former un jugement en se basant

sur facilité avec laquelle certains exemples viennent en tête. Les résultats ont révélé que plus il était difficile pour les participants de se rappeler des situations où ils se sont sentis compris, moins ces derniers rapportaient être identifiés à leur relation, car ils se sentaient moins compris. Les études 4 et 5 visaient à reproduire ces résultats au sein d'un autre type de relation : l'amitié. Les résultats ont démontré que se sentir compris par un ami accroît l'identification envers la relation d'amitié. Enfin, l'étude 6 visait à démontrer que s'identifier à une relation est associée à des répercussions importantes dans la vie quotidienne. En effet, les résultats ont révélé que plus les individus étaient identifiés à leur relation de couple, plus ils étaient susceptibles de protéger la confiance générale qu'ils entretenaient envers celle-ci, et ce, malgré la présence de conflits et de déceptions. Bref, l'ensemble de ces études suggèrent que les relations dans lesquelles on se sent compris sont plus susceptibles de devenir centrales à notre identité, ce qui revêt une grande importance lorsque vient le moment de surmonter les défis du quotidien.

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Statement of Original Knowledge

When reflecting on who we are, we may think about what is unique about us, what we value in life or the roles that we play in the society. Indeed, who we are represents our position in relation to the social world, which influences how we respond and behave in everyday life. Because of our fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000), social identities at both the group and interpersonal level may be especially prominent identities. This thesis focuses on the degree to which a specific relationship is perceived as centrally important to one's identity (i.e., *relationship identification*).

Although there is evidence from different theoretical frameworks suggesting that interpersonal relationships can become psychologically connected to one's identity, the mechanisms by which close relationships become a central part of who one is still unclear. To date, the causal antecedents to relationship identification remain unknown. This thesis contributes to the existing literature by examining the contribution of one potential relational process that may foster greater relationship identification – interpersonal understanding. In 5 studies using different methodologies, I provide empirical evidence that interpersonal understanding is a key experience in fostering identification with a specific relationship. This work also makes an important methodological contribution: it introduces two new experimental manipulations of perceived understanding in existing relationships. To date, much of the research examining perceived understanding uses correlational methods. Being able to manipulate perceived understanding may open new research avenues and provide new insights into the effects of perceived understanding.

This research also shows that understanding is uniquely associated with relationship identification. In contrast, other important features of an intimate relationship, such as caring and

acceptance, were not associated with relationship identification in the same way. Thus, this work is consistent with and expands on self-verification research by showing that there is something special about perceived understanding that may be connected to important relational processes such as relationship identification. Indeed, feeling known by a close other may not necessarily lead to the same consequences as feeling cared for and appreciated. For instance, understanding may be central in highlighting the person's identity and what is unique about them. To the extent that a close relationship helps clarify or stabilize a person's identity, then that relationship may be especially likely to become important to them.

Another contribution of this thesis is its examination of the role relationship identification may play in meeting daily relationship challenges. Indeed, even the healthiest couples will occasionally face conflict: Partners may be critical or break promises, and these experiences may be quite hurtful. Diary data revealed that individuals who perceive their relationship as central to their identity (high identifiers) are especially affected by these negative events, but at the same time, seem motivated to not let one bad event affect their overall conviction that the relationship is satisfying. Importantly, this research also highlights the importance of examining the motivational bases of commitment, which is a macromotive reflecting one's overall motivation to maintain the relationship. Specifically, I found that relationship identification predicted reactions to partner transgressions, whereas intrinsic motivation did not. Thus, by investigating specific motivational bases of commitment, such as relationship identification, we may gain a deeper understanding of the motivational forces that drive relationship-relevant behaviours.

Contribution of Author

The present thesis comprises six studies. I had the leading role in conceptualizing and elaborating the ideas presented in this thesis. I also conducted all the analyses, interpreted the results, and wrote the initial draft. My supervisor, John E. Lydon, advised me in developing the ideas presented in this work. He also provided me with invaluable feedback and support at every stage of this research.

The second chapter of this thesis reports findings from two studies. I designed, implemented, and collected the data from Study 1. Data used in Study 2 were part of a larger project, conducted by Carolyn Birnie-Porter and John E. Lydon. Carolyn Birnie-Porter designed, oversaw, and coordinated the data collection for this study.

The third chapter reports findings from three experiments. I developed, designed, and implemented all three studies with the guidance of John E. Lydon. I also collected the data, performed the data analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

The fourth chapter reports finding from an experience sampling and daily diary study. The findings presented in this chapter are published in the *Journal of Personality.* This article is co-authored by myself, Danielle Menzies-Toman, and John E. Lydon. Danielle Menzies-Toman and John E. Lydon designed this study and coordinated the data collection. I developed the study hypotheses, analyzed the data, and wrote and revised the manuscript, with the guidance of John E. Lydon.

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

Humans are social in nature and wired to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Indeed, intimate relationships allow us to fulfill important needs such as needs for connectedness and security (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Moreover, close relationships play a central role in our physical health and psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). In adulthood, romantic relationships appear to be particularly salient and meaningful in fulfilling individuals' needs: The vast majority of adults around the world currently have an intimate relationship. In 2016, 16.5 million Canadian adults aged over 15 were currently in a significant relationship (i.e., married or in a common law relationship; Statistic Canada, 2017).

Unfortunately, maintaining relationships can be challenging. Even the healthiest relationships will inevitably face challenges from time to time. Conflicts of interest, partner transgressions, or the temptation of an alternative mate are examples of potentially threatening situations that individuals must overcome to maintain their relationship (Lydon & Quinn, 2013). Moreover, now more than ever before, individuals have increasingly higher expectations of what their romantic relationships should offer them, which puts relationships under further strain (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). Thus, it can be very difficult to maintain satisfying relationships, which is evident in the relatively high divorce rate in our society. In Canada, about 38% of all couples who wed in 2004 are expected to divorce before their 30th wedding anniversary, based on past divorce patterns (Ambert, 2009). In Quebec, this rate was even higher: 48.4% marriages are expected to end in divorce. Given the importance yet vulnerability

of romantic relationships, understanding what contributes to the development of positive relationships is increasingly important.

Several theoretical perspectives in social psychology and close relationships research suggest that interpersonal relationships can become an important part of one's sense of self (i.e., are internalized), and this internalization is associated with positive relationship functioning. For example, research has shown that when the self and the relationship are psychologically connected, relationships are more satisfactory (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999), more resilient to adversities (Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Lydon & Linardatos, 2012), and more stable over time (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Similarly, self-determination theory suggests that values, goals, and relationships can ultimately become part of one's sense of self, and this has important consequences for psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and personal involvement (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Thus far, much of this research has focused on the *consequences* of this internalization for relationship functioning and psychological well-being (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003). However, less research has examined the process through which the self becomes tied to a relationship.

With the research presented in this thesis, I aim to provide a better understanding of how individuals come to represent their romantic relationship as a core part of themselves, henceforth referred to as *relationship identification*. I propose one specific relational experience likely to increase relationship identification – feeling understood. Specifically, this thesis examines whether perceived understanding may be a key driving force behind the development of relationship identification. Additionally, because relationship identification involves seeing one's relationship as part of the self, then it should also have implications for the relationship, more

especially for individuals' appraisals of relationship experiences. My thesis also aims to examine whether relationship identification predicts how people make sense of their personal and relational experiences in daily life.

In the current chapter, I will begin by considering different theoretical perspectives that emphasize the different ways in which close relationships shape one's sense of self. Next, I will discuss relationship identification and mention how it differs from other relationship constructs such as relationship commitment. I will then present psychological theories and empirical evidence indicating that self-disclosure and perceived understanding are critical to relationship development, as well as theories and research suggesting that having others understanding us plays an important role in how we see the self. Finally, I will present research that focuses on relationship challenges, ways in which individuals cope with these challenges, and how relationship identification might intervene.

The Self and Interpersonal Relationships

When individuals reflect on who they are, they may think about what defines them, what makes them unique (e.g., personal characteristics, skills), the feelings that they have about themselves, and/or what they value in life. A person's self-concept represents a flexible cognitive structure that organizes information about the self, such as goals or desired selves and theories or scripts for behaviors (Markus & Wurf, 1987). This conceptualization of the self suggests that different aspects of one's life, including close relationships, can become part of one's sense of self. This idea forms the basis of several theories.

A vast literature has examined social aspects of the self and how interpersonal relationships impact self-definitions. Relationship experiences are such a core part of the self that the self may be characterized as a relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, &

Tapias, 2006). For example, the work of Chen and her colleagues on the relational self suggests that individuals develop and internalize mental representations of themselves in relation to significant others ("me when I am with my mother"), which subsequently influence goals, emotions, and behaviors relatively automatically (see also Baldwin, 1992). For example, the activation of a relational self associated with a specific relationship (e.g., with one's mother or spouse) increases the accessibility of goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003), emotions (Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996), and behavioral responses (Berk & Andersen, 2000; 2008) that are associated with the significant other. Through these mental representations of how the self is with significant others, our significant others exert a powerful influence on our interpersonal life.

Although everyone possesses relational selves (Chen et al., 2006), there are individual differences in the extent to which close relationships are central to one's sense of self. For example, research on the relational-interdependent self-construal has shown that individuals differ in the degree to which they define themselves in terms of their close relationships (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Individuals with a highly relational-interdependent self-construal perceive their close relationships as self-defining. Their self-views incorporate representations of important relationships, and thus information about close relationships are tightly linked to information about the self (i.e., one's personality traits, abilities; Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002). Those with a highly relational self-construal seem to be chronically "tuned in" to relationships. In contrast, individuals with a lower relational-interdependent self-construal tend to think of themselves more in terms of their unique traits, abilities, and preferences; they hold an independent view of the self. The relational-interdependent self-construal perspective examines the degree to which individuals define themselves in terms of their close relationships *in general*.

Therefore, it represents a general tendency to incorporate relationships with others to the self-concept, and it is not specific to any relationship.

Yet, relational selves and models of the self exist at different levels of specificity (Chen et al., 2006; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003; Pierce & Lydon, 2011) including a general model as well as more relationship-specific models (Acitelli et al., 1999). Therefore, individuals who do not show a general tendency to see their close relationships as self-defining may nevertheless see a *specific* relationship as self-defining and construe their sense of self in terms of this relationship – what has been termed *relationship identification* (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Indeed, through meaningful experiences, individuals may eventually come to perceive a specific relationship as an important part of the self. Consequently, one's self-views become connected to this relationship, rendering the relational self associated with this specific relationship more salient (Chen et al., 2006). For example, when a highly identified person is making a significant personal decision, the relational self associated with this specific relationship and its content (such as the partner's preferences, the relationship goals) is more likely to be activated, which in turn influences one's personal decision (Cross et al., 2000). Thus, this relational perspective emphasizes the unique potential of a specific relationship to be closely tied to the self.

Other theoretical perspectives also recognize that being involved in a specific relationship can influence the way individuals think about themselves. For example, a growing body of research on the inclusion-of-other-in-the-self (IOS; Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Slotter & Gardner, 2009) indicates that individuals in romantic relationships often incorporate their partner's self-attributes, beliefs, and resources into their self-concepts (see Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, Mashek, Lewandowski, Wright, & Aron, 2004, for a review). This

theoretical perspective suggests that as relationship closeness increases, individuals are more likely to incorporate aspects of their partner's characteristics into their self-concepts, and consequently, the degree of differentiation between oneself and one's partner decreases. Research has shown, for example, that individuals high in IOS are quicker to determine if an attribute describe themselves when the attribute is descriptive of both themselves and a close other than when the attribute is only descriptive of themselves (Aron et al., 1991). This provides supportive evidence that close others, such as a romantic partner, can become part of the self.

How does the IOS approach relate to relationship identification? Both the IOS approach and the concept of relationship identification posit that relationships with close others can influence the self. However, unlike the IOS approach, relationship identification does not suggest that individuals are taking on their close others' resources, perspectives, or traits as part of themselves; rather, it suggests that individuals are incorporating their relationship into their sense of self. That is, the relationship is considered a central part of one's identity.

In that sense, relationship identification is more akin to identity theories (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982) in that an individual defines the self as the self in relation to a specific other and that the *relationship* is internalized. This approach also bears some resemblance to cognitive interdependence – the tendency to view the self and the partner as part of a collective unit (Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Cognitively interdependent individuals "think of themselves in terms of the relationship" (p. 279, Agnew & Etchevery, 2006) and their cognitions reflect how dependent or interdependent they are with their partner. For example, they use more plural pronouns ("we", "us", "our") when referring to their relationship, they perceive greater overlap between self and partner (as measured by the IOS), and they regard the relationship as a central part of themselves.

Thus, cognitive interdependence refers to a variety of cognitions that relate in different ways to IOS and to relationship identification. Relationship identification is somewhat more specific as it primarily focuses on relationship centrality; the extent to which the relationship is considered as central in defining the self[1].

Moreover, relationship identification is expected to be associated with other broader concepts related to relationship quality such as relationship satisfaction and commitment. Relationship satisfaction is an affective judgment that captures one's positive feeling about the relationship (Berscheid, 1994; Hendrick, 1988). One could expect individuals who identify with their relationship to also feel positive about the relationship. Moreover, as the relationship is an important part of who they are, individuals should have a strong intention to maintain the relationship (i.e., high in relationship commitment; Lydon & Zanna, 1990; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). However, many researchers have suggested that relationship commitment is a relatively broad, multifaceted concept (i.e., a macromotive; Holmes, 1981) that encompasses various relationship-specific motives (Blais et al., 1990). One can be motivated to maintain a relationship because the relationship is satisfying (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), because it is something that one ought to do (Frank & Brandstätter, 2002; Johnson, 1991) or because it reflects one's identity (Brickman, 1987; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997). Therefore, when individuals are asked whether they would like their relationship to persist in the future, all of these motives may ultimately contribute to their desire to maintain the relationship. Commitment should therefore be a strong predictor of relationship longevity because of its broad bandwidth (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). In contrast, relationship identification can be conceptualized as a specific motivational basis for commitment (i.e., one reason why individuals would commit to their relationship). Linardatos and Lydon (2011) found

that relationship identification does indeed correlate with relationship satisfaction and commitment; however, these correlations are moderate, indicating that the constructs are not completely overlapping.

Self-determination theory (SDT) has also informed this conceptualization of relationship identification. SDT research (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that a goal (such as preserving a relationship) can be internalized into the self to varying degrees. Specifically, through a process of internalization, a person may come to fully embrace and identify with a relationship because it is personally important and meaningful. That is, the person has come to be high in relationship identification. On the motivational continuum, identification is distinct from externally regulated "have to" motives. High identifiers would presumably maintain their relationship not because they feel obligated but because it is a central aspect of who they are. Moreover, it is distinct from the motivation to sustain a relationship because of its hedonic value (i.e., intrinsic motivation). Although intrinsic motivation and identification are both fueled by a feeling of volition and freedom to different degrees, a goal associated with an identified motivation is not pursued for the spontaneous enjoyment to be derived from its pursuit but through the recognition and acceptance of its underlying value. Whereas intrinsic motives provide a self-sustaining motivational force, goals that are pursued for identified motives "may remain personally salient, and thus continue to receive effort, even when it is not enjoyable" (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, p. 554; see also Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Therefore, relationship identification may provide the motivation to maintain and protect the relationship in the face of obstacles.

Indeed, recent research has shown that relationship identification is key in fostering pro-

relationship cognitions and behaviors. The more individuals define themselves in terms of their romantic relationship, the more they protect their relationship from the threat of an attractive other, which is well-documented and pervasive threat to the stability of relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Miller, 1997; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990). For example, research has shown that they will engage in spontaneous, and even automatic, relationship maintenance responses when faced with the temptation of attractive alternatives, such as diverting their attention away from attractive opposite-sex others (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Moreover, relationship identification is a better predictor of such automatic responses than commitment, highlighting its importance in maintaining valued relationships.

Although individuals differ in the extent to which they incorporate their relationship into their sense of self, it is important to note that relationship identification is not a trait-like disposition. That is, individuals' general orientation toward others (i.e., the extent to which they are interdependent) does not completely account for the extent to which individuals will identify with a specific relationship (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Through valuable experiences with a romantic partner, even individuals who do not typically define themselves in terms of their close relationships may come to internalize their romantic relationship as central to their sense of self. However, research to date has not yet examined the specific experiences that promote relationship identification. The first goal of my research is to investigate what kind of relational experiences lead individuals to see their romantic relationship as an important part of their self-concept. I propose that *interpersonal understanding* is one route to relationship identification. In the next section, I review theoretical and empirical evidence suggesting that feeling understood may be essential in fostering relationship identification.

Self-Disclosure, Understanding and Relationship Development

A critical process in relationship development is *self-disclosure*. Indeed, research on the development of both new and existing relationships has repeatedly emphasized the importance of communicating information about oneself (Gore, Cross, & Morris, 2006; Hendrick, 1981; Laurenceau, Barret, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004; see Collins & Miller 1994 for a review). For example, Aron and his colleagues (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997) demonstrated how self-disclosure of one's innermost self creates a sense of closeness among strangers. In one experiment, participants were paired with a stranger and asked to either share intimate information about themselves (e.g., when did you last cry in front of another person?) or irrelevant information (e.g., How often do you get your haircut?). Results revealed that sharing intimate information with a stranger created a greater feeling of closeness than sharing irrelevant information. In existing relationships, self-disclosure is associated with feelings of love (i.e., feelings of attachment, caring, and intimacy) more than liking (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980). However, individuals do not self-disclose indiscriminately. During the early stages of a relationship, individuals will often reveal superficial aspects of themselves, such as personal facts and activity preferences. As the relationship develops, however, individuals tend to disclose core aspect of themselves, such as one's profound fears and hopes. It has been proposed by social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) that this process of revealing different layers of oneself progressively helps move toward greater intimacy. That is, revealing core aspects of the self has been proposed as a critical component in the development and maintenance of relationship because it creates a shift toward greater closeness and interdependence in established relationships.

Expressing central aspects of the self to someone is particularly important because it provides opportunities to *feel understood* by one's partner (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017; Reis & Shaver, 1988). When individuals feel understood by someone, they sense that the other person knows core aspects of themselves (e.g., their self-views, beliefs, personal goals) and how they experience the social world (e.g., their current feelings and thoughts; Reis et al., 2017). It is thus a *subjective feeling* of being known (Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009). For example, after a hard day at work, Jane tells her boyfriend Mike that she is disappointed in herself because she could not finish everything that she needed to do. Mike replies, "I understand why you would feel frustrated. You have high expectations for yourself." Jane is more likely to feel understood because Mike has labeled her current experience, and his response reflects that he knows core aspects of Jane's sense of self.

Research in the close relationships literature has repeatedly shown that having one's core sense of self understood by relationship partners is central to relationship well-being (see Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011, and Reis et al., 2017 for a review). For example, perceived understanding has been positively associated with relationship satisfaction, dyadic adjustment, closeness, and trust (Cahn, 1990; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman 2002; Pollman, & Finkenauer, 2000; Weger, 2005). Moreover, on days when individuals feel more understood by others, they report feeling closer to them (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000) and being more satisfied with their life (Lun, Kesebir, & Oishi, 2008).

Additionally, perceived understanding is closely connected to self-verification, which also plays a crucial role in close relationships. Self-verification theory posits that individuals have a strong desire to be perceived in a self-congruent manner. Consequently, individuals often prefer interacting with a person who understands them than someone who sees them more

positively than they do (e.g. Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Research in this area has shown that, in established relationships, individuals report being happier with their relationship and more intimate with their partner when their partner understands them than when their partner sees them more positively than they see themselves (i.e., self-verification motives override self-enhancement motives; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Katz & Joiner, 2002; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Many studies have shown that self-verification is especially important among married couples, whereas individuals who have just begun dating prefer being seen positively by their romantic partner (Letzring, & Noftle, 2010; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Swann et al., 1994). This suggests that understanding may play a key role in the development and maintenance of long-term relationships.

Understanding and the Self

Understanding is undeniably an important aspect of interpersonal relationships. However, the literature suggests that understanding may play a crucial function beyond promoting positive relationships: It directly influences one's sense of self. Several scholars have discussed how feeling understood by one's partner helps confirm one's self-concept (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Finkenauer & Righetti, 2009; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Rogers, 1961; Swann et al., 2003), which is one of the unique functions of social relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1964). Social psychologists have long held that others play a key role in forming and maintaining a sense of who we are. Many classic theories about the self in relationships, such as the symbolic interactionist theory or the looking-glass self (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), posit that beliefs about ourselves and our worldviews are constructed and maintained through our relationships. Indeed, without others, we would not know who we are or what our position in the world is. For example, if we were to live all alone on an island, how would we know if we are tall or not? We

would not. Instead, it is through our interpersonal experiences with others that we come to understand who we are (e.g., Fonagy, Gergely, & Target, 2007) and how the world functions (e.g., Hardin & Higgins, 1996; see also Berger & Kellner, 1964). Consequently, the more one feels understood by others, the more confident one should feel about their sense of self. When individuals feel understood by someone, they may sense that who they are is accurately reflected by this person (Swann et al., 2003) and, as such, they may experience greater certainty. Indeed, recent research has shown that individuals report greater certainty about who they are after receiving feedback that is consistent with their self-views (Stinson et al., 2010), a finding consistent with self-verification theory (Swann, 1997). Similarly, if individuals discover that they experience the world the same way as someone else (i.e., share their reality; Hardin & Higgins, 1996), they may feel that their worldviews are less subjective and more "tuned into social reality" (Stinson et al., 2010, p. 995). Thus, feeling understood provides evidence that one's views about *oneself* or the *world* reflect reality and are not erratic because others share one's reality.

In sum, understanding has significant implications not only for relationships but also for one's self-concept. Presumably, if understanding benefits both the self and the relationship, it may also influence one's relational self. There has, however, been little research investigating whether interpersonal understanding change how individuals construe their sense of self in the relationship (i.e., relational self). If one's relationship plays an important role in how one sees oneself (e.g., by confirming who one is), then this relationship may become centrally important to the self because of its function in clarifying and stabilizing the self. Furthermore, understanding is about someone knowing core aspects of the self. Thus, when one feels understood, important and core aspects of the self may become strongly activated in the context

of this specific relationship. Consequently, mental representations of the self and the relationship may become closely interwoven. In other words, one's sense of identity may be maintained through this specific relationship, thereby making it more likely to be perceived as an important part of one's identity.

The primary focus of my thesis was to determine whether interpersonal understanding influences the development of relationship identification. I aim to show that understanding plays a unique, distinctive role in shaping a relational identity. I also attempt to establish a causal relation between perceived understanding and relationship identification. Understanding the factors that influence relationship identification is important because a number of studies have highlighted the crucial role of relationship identification in relationship maintenance. The second aim of my thesis is to extend past research on relationship maintenance by examining whether relationship identification can be both costly and beneficial in difficult times.

Relationship Identification in Daily Life

As noted previously, seeing one's relationship as an important part of the self has important implications for interpersonal functioning. For example, individuals who are high in relationship identification tend to spontaneously divert their attention away from attractive opposite-sex others who might pose as an alternative to their current relationship partner (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Moreover, highly identified individuals seem to adopt defensive strategies to cope with a very different type of challenge: a value dissimilarity threat (Auger, Hurley, & Lydon, 2016). In one experiment, I examined what happens when individuals realize that their values about a significant couple decision differ from their partner's values. Given that similarity is an important aspect of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Byrne, 1961), it is not surprising that individuals felt more anxious after discovering a conflict of values. However,

highly identified individuals compensated for this significant threat (i.e., value conflict) by embellishing their perceptions of the relationship.

Relationship identification appears to motivate a variety of relationship maintenance strategies. Thus far, research has examined pro-relationship responses to experimentally-induced threats in the lab (e.g., an attractive alternative, leaning that one's partner holds different values). But what happens when partners fail us and disappoint us in daily life? If one has established a strong sense of identification with the relationship, shouldn't this be particularly hurtful?

The second aim of my thesis is to extend previous work on relationship identification and relationship maintenance by examining how highly identified individuals react when their partner fails them. A vast amount of research and our everyday experiences indicate that partners may be critical, show a lack of concern, ignore one's feelings, or break a promise. These experiences can be quite hurtful (Feeney, 2005; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Presumably, individuals for whom the relationship is personally relevant should be especially sensitive to and feel hurt by their partner's daily transgressions. Indeed, it has been shown that in the short-term, commitment exacerbates the harmful effect of negative interactions on relationship satisfaction (Li & Fung, 2013). Similarly, Lemay, Overall, and Clark (2012) found that feeling devalued by one's partner elicits greater hurt feelings among highly committed individuals. Yet, research also reveals that personally valuing a relationship leads to more pro-relationship outcomes. Can individuals feel hurt and be reactive in the moment but still protect their relationship?

Little is known about how these two processes may occur in a given situation. Can they happen in parallel? And if so, how? I propose that highly identified individuals can acknowledge negative events and the momentary negative impacts it has on them and the relationship;

however, the self-relevance of and their care for the relationship also motivate them to not let recent negative events affect their overall conviction that the relationship is satisfying. In other words, individuals who perceive their relationship as central to their identity (i.e., high identifiers) may be able to flexibly move past the concrete specifics of an event when reflecting on their relationship as a whole. The second focus of my thesis is to test this process by examining how high identifiers react to partner transgressions in everyday life.

The Present Program of Research

In the following chapters, I present 6 studies. Chapter 2 describes two studies exploring the predictive value of perceived understanding in relationship identification. In Study 1, I used a person-perception paradigm to determine whether the presence of understanding in romantic relationships influences individuals' impression of relationship identification. Study 2 extended these results by examining individuals in romantic relationships longitudinally.

Next, Chapter 3 describes a series of three studies exploring the causal effect of perceived understanding on relationship identification among romantically involved individuals and friends. Studies 3 and 4 experimentally manipulated felt understanding in romantic relationships and friendships respectively, using a well-established social psychological paradigm—the ease of retrieval paradigm. Study 5 provides a conceptual replication using a different experimental manipulation, a visualization task. I expected that feeling understood by a romantic partner or a friend would lead individuals to perceive their relationship with their romantic partner or a specific friend as an important part of who they are (i.e., to report higher levels of relationship identification).

Finally, Chapter 4 describes a two-week experience sampling and nightly diary study examining the downstream consequences of relationship identification. I investigated how being

highly identified with a relationship shapes how individuals respond when their partner behaves negatively toward them. More specifically, I examined (a) individuals' immediate reactivity to day-to-day changes in negative relationship events and (b) the cumulative effect of daily relationships events on global judgments of relationship satisfaction weeks later (Study 6). I investigated whether high identifiers were more reactive to day-to-day changes in negative relationship events. I also showed how high identifiers may protect their relationship despite recent conflicts and their heightened reactivity to these negative events. I expected high identifiers to be able to separate their global judgments of relationship satisfaction from recent negative experiences.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that understanding increases relationship identification and that relationship identification is important for coping with everyday challenges couples experienced.

Footnotes

[1]Previous work has found a moderate correlation between the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992) and relationship identification, $r(150) = .35$, $p < .001$ (as reported in Linardatos & Lydon, 2011), which indicates that there are potentially meaningful theoretical differences between these two constructs. Moreover, in a recent reanalysis of Linardatos and Lydon's data (2011; Study 2), we found that individual differences in inclusion-of-others-in-the-self and relationship identification were associated with different patterns of self-expression. Specifically, people high (vs. low) on the IOS were more likely to mention their partner when answering questions about themselves (e.g., "What do you normally do on the weekends?") in an instant messaging task. Unlike people high on the IOS, highly identified individuals did not indiscriminately mention their partner: They only did so when randomly assigned to interact with an attractive person of their preferred sex, a potentially relationship-threatening situation (e.g., Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999). Specifically, the more identified individuals were, the more likely they were to mention their partner or their relationship to the attractive alternative. However, this association was not found in the control condition (i.e., when the interaction partner was of the same sex). Thus, inclusion-of-other-in-the-self may lead people to think and talk as though they are one with their partner. Consequently, when they talk about themselves, they are more likely to say things that pertain to the partner or the relationship. However, if one's relationship is self-defining, then the goal of maintaining the relationship may be a particularly central element of the self. Thus, relationship identification may be especially helpful in overcoming challenges by promoting relationship maintenance strategies. It would be interesting in future research to investigate the differential effect of the inclusion-of-other-in-the self and

relationship identification on pro-relationship strategies. Seeing the self as overlapping with the partner may not necessarily be the same as seeing the relationship as part of the self.

Chapter 2

Study 1 – Person Perception Paradigm

The present study explores the factors that contribute to relationship identification. More specifically, I examined whether *feeling understood* is critical in forging a sense of relationship identification. The second objective of this study is to compare the predictive value of feeling understood to another specific relational experience related to feeling understood: *feeling cared for*. Previous research in the close relationships literature suggests that feeling understood is a defining characteristic of an intimate interaction, along with feeling accepted and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988; see also Gable & Reis, 2006; Reis & Gable, 2015). Whereas understanding is about someone knowing central aspects of ourselves, feeling accepted is about feeling valued and positively regarded by one's partner. In contrast, feeling cared for is about feeling that the partner shows concern, and tries to be helpful and supportive. Importantly, individuals experience a close sense of intimacy with their partner when they reveal core aspects of who they are, and feel *understood, accepted*, and *cared for* by the partner as a result (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Reis et al., 2004). This feeling of intimacy also contributes to fostering greater relationship well-being (e.g., Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Rubin & Campbell, 2012; Sanderson & Cantor, 2001).

Although intimacy is a key aspect of satisfying relationships, and all three aspects of intimacy (i.e., feeling understood, cared for, and accepted) likely covary and enhance relationships, theoretically they are not one and the same, and may have independent effects (see also Reis et al., 2017). Acceptance and caring may help individuals feel good about themselves and the relationship; yet, understanding may help individuals confirm their thoughts and feelings about themselves. Thus, understanding may play an important role in maintaining a stable sense

of self, as proposed by self-verification theory (Swann et al., 2003). Moreover, past research provides some evidence that understanding and acceptance fulfill different needs (i.e., epistemic and esteem needs; Stinson et al., 2010; see also Lackenbauer, Campbell, Rubin, Fletcher, & Troister, 2010). Hence, understanding may have a beneficial effect beyond caring or acceptance.

In everyday life, the experience of feeling understood, cared for, and accepted presumably often co-occur, especially in highly interdependent relationships. Indeed, close others who have a deep understanding of who you are may know the best way to support you (e.g., Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Feeney, 2007; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). However, the experience of feeling understood, cared for, and accepted may not always co-occur[1]. For example, one may feel understood but not cared for by a partner who has a deep understanding of one's self-views but is unreliable in providing support. Alternatively, one may have a partner who shows consistent concern and support but is not attuned to one's hopes and fears. If one cannot have both the experience of being understood and cared for, what happens? What are the consequences of not feeling known or understood? Are they different from having a partner who may not always follow through with caring? The present study examines what happens when understanding is present but caring is lacking. Does this increase perceptions of identification compared to a condition in which caring is present but understanding is lacking? By separating understanding and caring, I aim to identify which component is crucial (and unique) to relationship identification.

Because understanding and caring are naturalistically correlated, I used a person-perception paradigm that allowed me to manipulate these two constructs. In Study 1, I manipulated a scenario in which the target person, Jane, describes her partner Mike as high in understanding and low in caring, or low in understanding and high in caring. If understanding is

what matters most in shaping relationship identification, then participants in the scenario in which Jane feels deeply understood should judge her to be high in identification.

The primary goal of the present research is to test whether identification levels differ across experimental conditions. I also tested for the effectiveness of the manipulation (i.e., intimacy) and for discriminant validity (i.e., relationship satisfaction). Specifically, I examined whether satisfaction levels also differ across the two experimental conditions. Finally, I examined the relative contribution of perceived understanding and caring on relationship identification and satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedure. One hundred and eighteen participants were recruited on Crowdflower to participate in a study on impressions of interpersonal relationships. The study was restricted to participants in North America. Four participants were excluded because their citizenship made them ineligible (n = 1) or because they failed to complete the manipulation check or the dependent measure (n = 3). The final sample (N = 114) consisted of 59 males and 55 females. On average, participants were 36.83 years old (SD = 13.36; Mdn = 33.00; range =18-79) and those currently involved in a romantic relationship (n = 69) had been together for 12.25 years (SD = 26.32 years). Participants were singles (n = 42), dating or cohabiting (n = 19), engaged or married (n = 50), or divorced or widower (n = 3).

Participants were presented with one of the two versions of a vignette in which Jane describes her relationship with Mike. Approximately half of the participants were presented with a scenario in which Jane felt understood but not as cared for (n = 53). The other half were presented with a scenario in which Jane felt cared for but not as understood (n = 61; see Appendix A for the vignettes). Participants were then asked to make several judgments about

Jane to assess understanding and caring (i.e., "How much do you think Jane *feels understood* by Mike?"; "How much do you think Jane feels *cared for* by Mike?") as well as the third feature of intimacy, acceptance—as defined by Reis and Shaver (1988; i.e., "How much do you think Jane feels *accepted* by Mike?"). These items were used as manipulation checks. Next, participants indicated their perception of relationship identification using 4 items adapted from the Specific Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal (S-RISC) Scale (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011; "To what extent do you think Jane feels Mike is an important part of who she is?"; "To what extent do you think that their relationship is an important part of Jane's self-image?"; "To what extent do you think that when Jane thinks of herself, she also thinks of Mike"; "To what extent do you think that Jane's relationship is an important reflection of who she is"; $\alpha = .84$). I selected the items from the original scale that made the most sense for judging from a third-person perspective. Finally, participants indicated their perception of relationship satisfaction using a single item (i.e., "How satisfied is Jane with the relationship?"). All answers were recorded on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *very much*).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive analyses are presented in Table 1.

Data analytic strategy. First, I tested the effectiveness of the manipulation on understanding and caring. Then, I examined whether identification levels differed between experimental conditions. I also tested for discriminant validity by examining whether satisfaction levels differed between experimental conditions. Finally, I explored the degree to which relationship identification and satisfaction could be accounted for by ratings of understanding and caring. The 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (BCa 95% CI) for the mean differences and the unstandardized regression coefficients are based on 5 000 resamples (Cumming, 2014).

Manipulation check. First, I examined whether participants perceived greater understanding in the high-understanding condition than in the high-caring condition and greater caring in the high-caring condition than in the high-understanding condition. I conducted a between-within ANOVA in which the manipulation check (understanding and caring) was the within-participant factor and condition (high understanding vs. high caring) was the between-participant factor. As expected, the results revealed an interaction between the measure and condition, Wilks' = .48, $F(1,112) = 121.96$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .52$. The nature of the interaction is depicted in Figure 1. Ratings of understanding were higher in the high-understanding condition, $M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.45$, than in the high-caring condition, $M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.40$; $F(1,112) = 87.51$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .44$. Ratings of caring were higher in the high-caring condition, $M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.12$, than in the high-understanding relationship, $M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.11$; $F(1,112) = 30.06$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .21$. Moreover, within the high-understanding condition, participants reported higher ratings of understanding than caring $F(1,112) = 11.28$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .09$. In contrast, within the high-caring condition, participants reported higher ratings of caring than understanding, $F(1,112) = 158.60$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .59$. Further analyses revealed no significant differences between conditions for accepted, $F(1,112) = 1.58$, $p = .21$, $n_p^2 = .01$, suggesting that I did not inadvertently manipulate acceptance.

Predicting relationship identification and satisfaction. I tested my main prediction concerning relationship identification using a *t*-test (0 = high-understanding condition; 1 = high-caring condition). As expected, identification ratings were higher for the high-understanding relationship, $M = 4.82$, $SD = .96$, than for the high-caring relationship, $M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.13$, $t(112) = 3.55$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = .67$. The estimated difference between the two conditions was 0.70, BCa 95% CI [0.34, 1.08]. Further analysis revealed that satisfaction ratings were also

higher for the high-understanding relationship, $M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.04$, than for the high-caring relationship, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.15$, $t(112) = 3.10$, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .58$. The estimated difference between the two conditions was 0.64, BCa 95% CI [0.22, 1.05]. In other words, Jane was perceived as being more identified with her relationship, but also more satisfied with her relationship when understanding was high than when caring was high (Figure 2).

I also explored the degree to which ratings of understanding and caring predicted relationship identification and relationship satisfaction. I conducted multiple regressions separately for relationship identification and satisfaction with the manipulation checks for understanding and caring entered as mean-centered continuous variables. Understanding predicted relationship identification, $b = 0.29$, BCa 95% CI [0.18, 0.39], $SE = 0.05$, $t(111) = 5.67$, $p < .001$, $r = .47$; however, caring was not reliably associated with relationship identification, $b = 0.13$, BCa 95% CI [-0.05, 0.31], $SE = 0.08$, $t(111) = 1.72$, $p = .09$, $r = .16$. Moreover, both understanding, $b = 0.36$, BCa 95% CI [0.26, 0.46], $SE = 0.05$, $t(111) = 7.47$, $p < .001$, $r = .58$, and caring, $b = 0.26$, BCa 95% CI [0.12, 0.38], $SE = 0.07$, $t(111) = 3.51$, $p < .001$, $r = .32$, predicted relationship satisfaction. This provides further support that understanding is associated with identification independently of caring. In contrast, both understanding and caring appear to be important predictors of relationship satisfaction[2].

All the analyses were replicated controlling for relationship status and gender. No effects of gender nor relationship status were found (all ps > .07) and participant gender and relationship status did not moderate any of the investigated effects (all ps > .13). Moreover, all significant results remained significant (all $ps < .01$) when controlling for either relationship status or gender.

In Study 1, I created vignettes to better identify what is crucial about intimacy in forging relationship identification. Concretely, I pitted understanding against caring and tested whether one component of intimacy, understanding, was more important than the other, caring, to create a sense of identification. Although feeling cared for is beneficial for relationships, its presence versus absence did not have the same impact as the corresponding manipulation of understanding. More specifically, the presence of understanding contributed to relationship identification more than the presence of caring. Thus, Study 1 provides initial evidence for my hypothesis.

Moreover, the current findings are consistent with the literature on intimacy. Indeed, many studies have shown that intimacy is associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2005; Rubin & Campbell, 2012). Thus, the findings of the current study add to this literature by showing that two critical aspects of intimacy, *understanding* and *caring*, contribute to relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, understanding appears to contribute to relationship identification without necessarily being accompanied by high levels of caring. Indeed, understanding, but not caring, was uniquely associated with relationship identification. This study provides preliminary evidence that understanding and caring may differentially impact satisfaction and identification in romantic relationships.

One limitation of this study is that it only focused on people's lay conceptions: Participants were asked to judge someone else's relationship, not their own. Implicit lay theories are important reflections of one's relationship experiences as well as normative expectations that are likely to guide future relationship experiences. However, this is not the same as in-the-moment relationship experiences. Thus, it remains unclear whether individuals who feel more understood by their romantic partner are actually more likely to be identified with their

relationship. In Study 2, I tested people in romantic relationships longitudinally in order to address this question. More specifically, I tested whether perceived understanding would predict change in relationship identification above and beyond the other two components of intimacy (i.e., feeling accepted and cared for).

Study 2 – Two-Wave Longitudinal Study

In Study 2, I used longitudinal data to examine whether understanding predicts changes in relationship identification over time. Because this was a naturalistic field study, it was possible to measure variation in all three components of intimacy – understanding, caring, and acceptance. As outlined before, numerous findings suggest that intimacy is associated with relationship satisfaction (Laurenceau et al., 2005; Rubin & Campbell, 2012; Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Therefore, one could expect intimacy to also predict change in relationship identification. I propose, however, that *perceived understanding* is the key driving force behind the development of relationship identification. That is, whereas intimacy may predict change in relationship identification over time, I expected that when each component of intimacy is isolated, understanding would be a unique predictor of relationship identification. I also assessed discriminant validity by examining the association between each intimacy component and relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Two hundred and ten participants currently involved in a romantic relationship were recruited to participate in a longitudinal study and agreed to complete our questionnaire at Time 1. When both members of the couple completed the study, only one member was kept in the sample to eliminate non-independence in the data. Fourteen participants were excluded based on this criterion ($N_{\text{Time 1}} = 196$).

One hundred and forty-five participants completed the questionnaire at Time 2; however, one hundred and eighteen of them were still in the same relationship as Time 1[3]. Given that relationship identification is specific to a particular relationship, I conducted analyses for individuals who were still in the same relationship as Time 1 only. Moreover, one participant did not complete the variables of interest and was thus excluded. Thus, the final sample consisted of 117 participants (86 female). On average, participants were 27.77 years old (*SD* = 7.66; *Mdn* = 26.00; range = 18-65) and had been dating for 5.40 years (*SD* = 6.19 years). Fifty-nine participants were dating, 55 were engaged or married, and 3 participants were dating more than one partner.

At Time 1, initial levels of intimacy, relationship identification, and relationship satisfaction were assessed. Approximately 8 months later (Time 1 - February; Time 2 - last week of October), participants were recontacted and asked to complete our measures of relationship identification and relationship satisfaction.

Measures.

Intimacy (Time 1). Consistent with the Reis and Shaver's (1988) concept of intimacy, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt understood, accepted, and cared for by their partner (α = .91) on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *A lot*).

Relationship identification (Time 1 and Time 2). Participants completed the Specific Relational Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (S-RISC scale; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011; α = .91 for Time 1, and α = .92 for Time 2), which is a modification of the Relational-Interdependent Self-Construal Scale (Cross et al., 2000). The scale consists of 11 items (e.g., "My current romantic relationship is an important reflection of who I am" and "When I think of myself, I

often think of my partner also"). Participants indicated their level of agreement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Relationship satisfaction (Time 1 and Time 2). Participants completed a relationship general form of the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). The scale is comprised of 6 items including "My relationship with my partner makes me happy" and "We have a good relationship" (α = .94 for Time 1 and α = .96 for Time 2; 1 = *very strongly disagree* to 7 = *very strongly agree).* The last item of this scale asked participants to indicate what degree of happiness best described their relationship when all things were considered (1 = *unhappy* to 10 = *perfectly happy*, the middle point being *happy*). Items were standardized and averaged to create a composite score of relationship satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive analyses are presented in Table 2.

Data analytic strategy. First, I tested whether feeling more intimate at Time 1 (i.e., feeling understood, cared for, and accepted) predicted change in relationship identification 8 months later. I also tested for discriminant validity by examining whether intimacy predicted relationship satisfaction in a similar way. Then, I examined whether understanding uniquely predicted change in relationship identification. Again, I tested for discriminant validity by examining whether understanding also uniquely predicted change in relationship satisfaction.

Intimacy. First, I investigated whether intimacy at Time 1 predicted change in relationship identification from Time 1 to Time 2. I performed a hierarchical regression analysis with identification at Time 2 regressed on relationship identification at Time 1 (to control for participants' baseline ratings) in a first step, and intimacy (mean-centered) at Time 1 in a second step. Controlling for participants' ratings of identification at Time 1 has the advantage of ruling

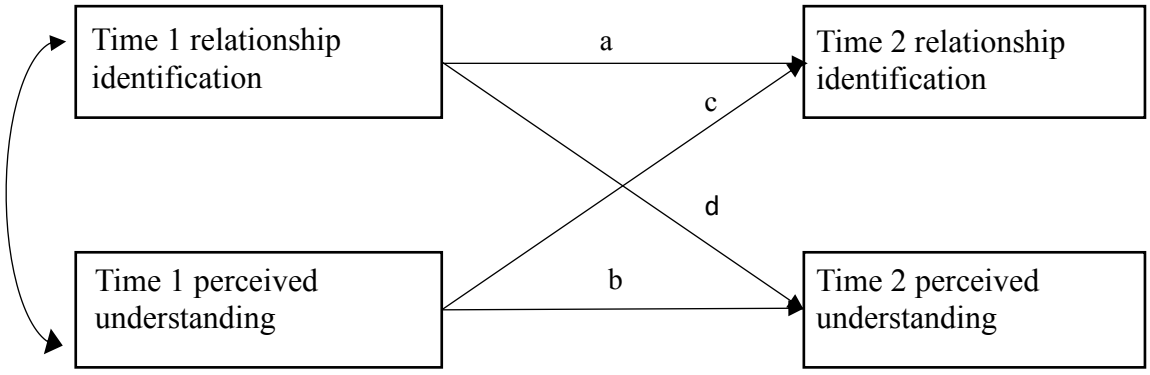
out the possibility that the cross-lagged effect is simply produced by a high correlation between relationship identification and perceived understanding at Time 1 (Selig & Little, 2012). Moreover, because this analysis is adjusting for participants' baseline identification scores, which were highly correlated with their Time 2 scores, it provides a conservative estimate of the predicted effect. I also conducted this analysis with satisfaction as the dependent variable.

Results revealed that greater intimacy at Time 1 was associated with an increase relationship identification 8 months later, $b = 0.14$, BCa 95% CI [0.02, 0.25], $SE = 0.07$, $t(114) = 2.08$, $p = .039$, $r = .19$, while controlling for Time 1 identification in a first step, $b = 0.69$, BCa 95% CI [0.55, 0.83], $SE = 0.07$, $t(114) = 9.87$, $p < .001$, $r = .68$; R^2 total step 2 = .57; $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p = .039$. Moreover, greater intimacy at Time 1 was associated with an increase in relationship satisfaction 8 months later, $b = 0.25$, BCa 95% CI [0.04, 0.45], $SE = 0.07$, $t(114) = 3.59$, $p < .001$, $r = .32$, while controlling for Time 1 relationship satisfaction in a first step, $b = 0.38$, BCa 95% CI [0.11, 0.67], $SE = 0.09$, $t(114) = 4.39$, $p < .001$, $r = .38$; R^2 total step 2 = .39; $\Delta R^2 = .069$, $p < .001$.

Feeling understood, accepted, and cared for. I then isolated each component of intimacy. The same data analytic strategy was used, with identification at Time 1 (to control for participants' baseline ratings) entered in the first step and each component of intimacy (mean-centered) at Time 1 entered in the second step. Results showed that feeling understood at Time 1 was a unique predictor of relationship identification at Time 2, $b = 0.18$, BCa 95 % CI [0.01, 0.33], $SE = 0.09$, $t(111) = 1.96$, $p = .053$, $r = .18$, whereas neither caring nor acceptance predicted identification, ts < 1.00 (again, controlling for baseline identification, $b = 0.66$, BCa 95% CI [0.51, 0.82], $SE = 0.07$, $t(111) = 8.85$, $p < .001$, $r = .64$; R^2 total step 2 = .56; $\Delta R^2 = .025$,

p = .093). This analysis was replicated with relationship satisfaction. None of the intimacy components uniquely predicted change in satisfaction, ts < 1.00.

Cross-lagged panel analysis. The previous results provide some evidence that feeling understood is a unique predictor of relationship identification. However, the temporal relationship between the two variables is unclear. Is there more evidence that feeling understood precedes participants' change in relationship identification or that relationship identification precedes changes in feeling understood? To examine the temporal relationships, I conducted a cross-lagged panel analysis. Cross-lagged models are often used to examine lagged relationships and causal predominance between two variables assessed at two different time points. The following cross-lagged panel model was estimated using path analysis:



This model controls for within-person stability in relationship identification and in perceived understanding by including autoregressive effects (i.e., path *a* and path *b*). This model tests whether the effect of perceived understanding at Time 1 on relationship identification at Time 2 (path *c*) is larger than the effect of relationship identification at Time 1 on perceived understanding at Time 2 (path *d*). If path *c* is greater than path *d*, then the results would suggest that understanding is more likely to precede relationship identification in a naturalistic sample

than the reverse (Selig & Little, 2012).

Moreover, structural equation modeling (SEM) allows models to be estimated using all available information, including information from participants with missing data. Thus, the cross-lagged path analysis was estimated using the full sample of 196 participants[4]. I conducted the analysis using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation, which deals effectively with missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Analyses were performed in R with the lavaan package.

Model 1 included only the autoregressive effects (paths *a* and *b*). This model did not fit the data well, $\chi^2 = 7.43$, df=2, $p = .024$, TLI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.12 (CI [0.036, 0.213]; SRMR = 0.061. In Model 2, the cross-lagged path between perceived understanding at Time 1 and relationship identification at Time 2 (path *c*) was added. This model fit the data well, $\chi^2 = .20$, df=1, $p = .66$, TLI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00 (CI [0.00, 0.15]; SRMR = 0.009, and the fit of Model 2 was significantly better than Model 1, $\Delta \chi^2 = 7.2336$, $df = 1$, $p = .007$. In contrast, Model 3, which included the two autoregressive paths (paths *a* and *b*) and the cross-lagged path between relationship identification at Time 1 and perceived understanding at Time 2 (path *d*), had a relatively poor fit, $\chi^2 = 6.431$, df=1, $p = .011$, TLI = 0.873, RMSEA = 0.166 (CI [0.063, 0.299]; SRMR = 0.049. Moreover, Model 3 did not show a better fit to the data than Model 1, $\Delta \chi^2 = 1.000$, $df = 1$, $p = .317$. Thus, it appears that understanding precedes change in relationship identification. Figure 3 represents the best fitting model with standardized path coefficients.

In sum, the findings from Study 2 echoed other findings from interpersonal research indicating that intimacy is associated with relationship quality (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2005; Reis et al., 2017; Reis & Gable, 2015). Precisely, I found that intimacy was predictive of changes in relationship identification as well as changes in relationship satisfaction over time: Individuals

experiencing more intimacy at Time 1 reported being more satisfied and more identified with their relationship 8 months later. Furthermore, consistent with my hypothesis, the results revealed that understanding uniquely predicted increased relationship identification over time. In contrast, feeling cared for and accepted did not uniquely predict change in relationship identification over time. The cross-lagged panel analysis also provides some evidence that perceived understanding may lead to greater relationship identification over time.

The findings from this study extend the results of Study 1 by showing that feeling understood by one's partner predicts change in relationship identification over time, despite the overall high stability of identification. Moreover, because perceived understanding predicts relationship identification after controlling for feeling cared for and accepted, this provides further evidence that there is something unique about perceived understanding that promotes relationship identification. The present findings also provide discriminant validity. Understanding at Time 1 was associated with relationship identification at Time 2 after controlling for baseline identification; however, understanding at Time 1 was not reliably associated with relationship satisfaction at Time 2 after controlling for baseline satisfaction. Moreover, none of the intimacy components uniquely contributed to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Instead, satisfaction was predicted by the aggregate measure of these components.

Results from Studies 1 and 2 also provide new insights on the importance of *perceived partner responsiveness*, a relatively inclusive construct capturing the extent to which a partner is perceived to be understanding, caring, and accepting (Reis & Gable, 2015). Existing research and theories posit that understanding signals acceptance and caring, and, as such, have given less attention to the possible distinct functions of understanding. Indeed, much of previous research

has examined how intimacy or perceived partner responsiveness, as a whole, promotes positive interpersonal processes rather than examining the unique contributions of each aspect. Moreover, much of this research has not thoroughly examined how these aspects may affect the self. Studies 1 and 2 highlight the unique contribution of understanding on individuals' sense of self and identity, which in turn may have positive consequences for the relationship. More specifically, Studies 1 and 2 revealed a unique effect of feeling understood. Study 1 suggests that people can perceive understanding even when caring is relatively low, and that this influences judgments about relationship identification. Study 2 suggests that perceived understanding plays an important role beyond one's own self-reports of feeling cared for and accepted.

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 examined what is critical in forging relationship identification. Using different methods, I provided evidence for the importance of understanding in the development of relationship identification. However, neither of these two studies provide causal evidence. Therefore, I conducted a series of experiments to directly assess the causal role of perceived understanding in forging a sense of relationship identification.

Footnotes

[1]Although understanding and caring often co-occur, and both of them are defining characteristics of intimacy, it does not mean that they are not distinct—just as height and weight correlate highly but are very different constructs. Reis and his colleagues (Gable & Reis, 2006; 2016; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Reis et al., 2017) have also proposed a similar distinction. Believing that a person sees us as we see ourselves is not necessarily the same as believing that this person cares for us. For example, a child may perceive his parents to be caring, supportive, and loving; yet, he might not expect his parents to fully understand him.

[2]In addition to our two main dependent variables (i.e., identification and satisfaction), participants were asked to judge how committed Jane is to her relationship (3 items; $\alpha = .78$), the degree to which she loves Mike (1 item), and how unhealthy this relationship is for her (1 item). Additional analyses revealed that commitment ratings were higher for the high-understanding relationship ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.17$) than for the high-caring relationship ($M = 3.60$, SD = 1.10, $t(111) = 2.16$, $p = .033$, Cohen's $d = .41$). Similarly, love ratings were higher for the high-understanding relationship ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.14$) than for the high-caring relationship ($M = 4.75$, SD = 1.13), although this difference did not reach significance, $t(111) = 1.86$, $p = .066$, Cohen's $d = .35$). Interestingly, participants did not perceive one relationship as being more unhealthy than the other, $t(110) = -0.07$, $p = .95$. I also conducted multiple regression for *relationship commitment* with the manipulation checks for understanding and caring entered as mean-centered continuous variables. Similar to the findings obtained for relationship satisfaction, both understanding and caring ratings were associated with relationship commitment, $b = 0.27$, BCa 95% CI [0.14, 0.38], $SE = 0.05$, $t(110) = 5.01$, $p < .001$, $r = .43$ and $b = 0.30$, BCa 95% CI [0.11, 0.46] $SE = 0.08$, $t(110) = 3.71$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$, respectively.

[3]Participants who broke up (n = 27) did not differ on understanding, acceptance, or caring from those who stayed with the same romantic partner. However, participants who broke up had significantly lower levels of relationship identification at Time 1, a finding consistent with a previous study conducted by Linardatos and Lydon (2011).

[4]The results remained unchanged when participants who broke up and participants who did not complete Time 2 questionnaire were excluded from the analyses.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) and Correlations for Study 1.

		Correlations				
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
High understanding, low caring condition						
1. Understood	5.43 (1.45)	-	.25^{t}	.17	.53**	.48**
2. Cared	4.62 (1.11)		-	.58**	.44**	.49**
3. Accepted	4.77 (1.32)			-	.51**	.61**
4. Identification	4.82 (.96)				-	.49**
5. Satisfaction	4.62 (1.04)					-
High caring, low understanding condition						
1. Understood	2.93 (1.40)	-	-.12	.14	.20	.46**
2. Cared	5.77 (1.12)		-	.41**	.01	.14
3. Accepted	5.07 (1.15)			-	.23^{t}	.51**
4. Identification	4.12 (1.13)				-	.32*
5. Satisfaction	3.98 (1.15)					-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p \leq .001$. $^{t}p < .10$.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) and Correlations for Study 2

		Correlations											
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Identification T1	5.16 (1.11)	-											
2. Satisfaction T1	-.01 (.90)	.53**	-										
3. Intimacy T1	6.06 (1.15)	.44**	.57**	-									
4. Understanding T1	5.68 (1.48)	.51**	.59**	.94**	-								
5. Cared for T2	6.28 (1.13)	.37**	.53**	.93**	.79**	-							
6. Accepted T2	6.23 (1.13)	.32**	.44**	.92**	.77**	.81**	-						
7. Identification T2	5.11 (1.12)	.74**	.44**	.44**	.51**	.37**	.32*	-					
8. Satisfaction T2	-.02 (.92)	.37**	.57**	.54**	.53**	.49**	.46**	.52**	-				
9. Intimacy T2	5.95 (1.07)	.43**	.54**	.84**	.80**	.77**	.76**	.54**	.63**	-			
10. Understanding T2	5.53 (1.40)	.42**	.51**	.75**	.75**	.65**	.66**	.58**	.61**	.92**	-		
11. Cared for T2	6.15 (1.06)	.45**	.58**	.80**	.72**	.81**	.70**	.48**	.59**	.91**	.74**	-	
12. Accepted T2	6.18 (1.07)	.32**	.38**	.76**	.70**	.69**	.72**	.38**	.53**	.91**	.73**	.80**	-

Note. Correlations are displayed for participants who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 (*n*=117)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

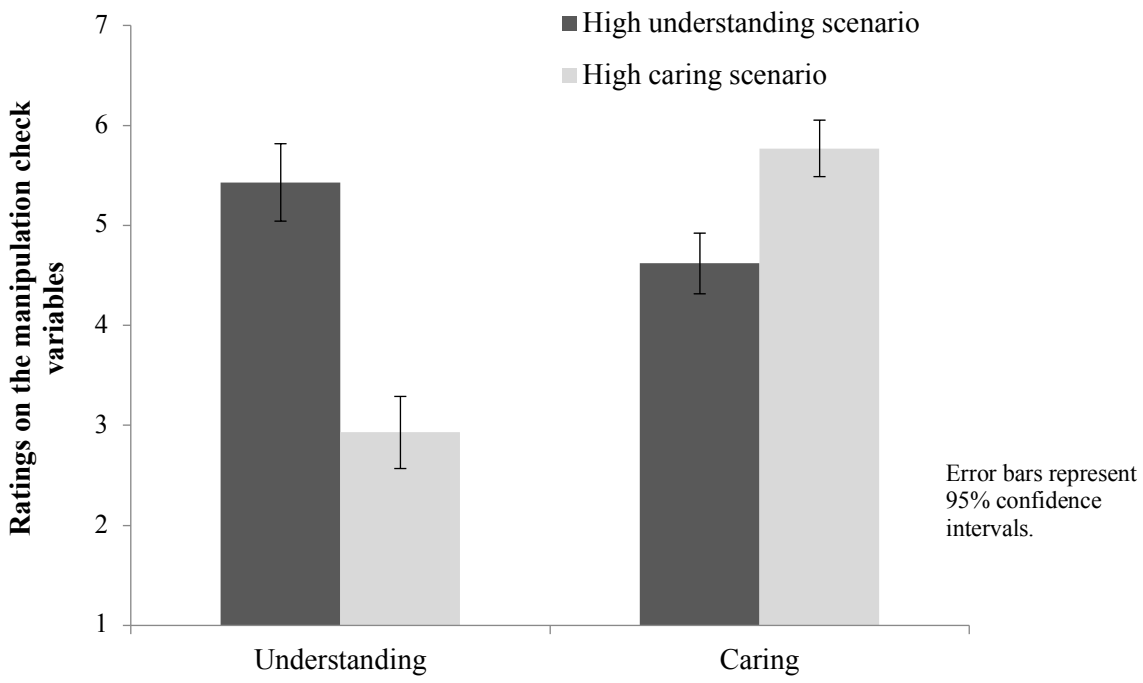


Figure 1. Understanding and caring ratings as a function of experimental condition (Study 1)

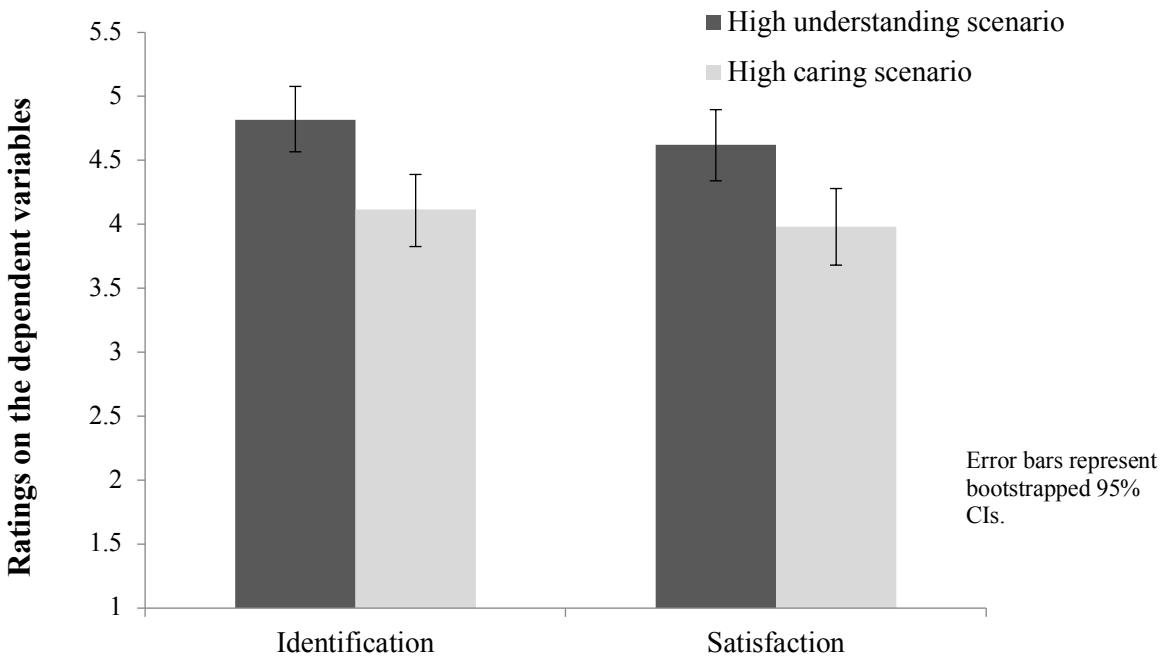


Figure 2. Relationship identification and satisfaction ratings as a function of experimental condition (Study 1)

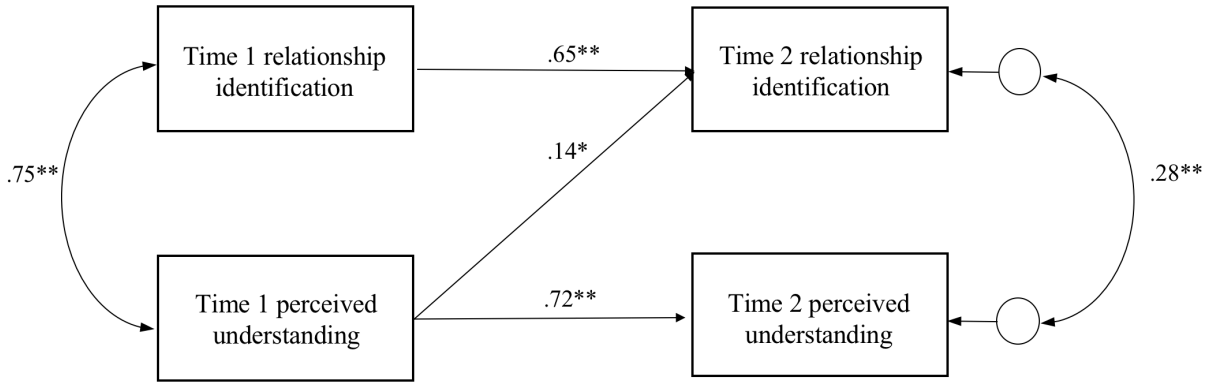


Figure 3. Cross-lagged panel results of the interrelations between relationship identification and perceived understanding (Study 2)

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

Chapter 3

In three experiments (Studies 3-5), I tested the causal relation between perceived understanding and relationship identification. Thus far, research in close relationships has focused on individual differences in perceived understanding and how it relates to relationship quality (Reis et al., 2017). Consequently, there is no experimental paradigm that systematically manipulates perceived understanding in existing relationships. However, understanding is a dynamic process that varies from one social interaction to another (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011; Reis & Shaver, 1988). As emphasized by Harvey and Omarzu (1997), the process of knowing one's partner is never-ending and requires continued effort. Although we might feel more understood in some relationships than others, within a relationship there may still be times when individuals do not feel as understood. Thus, perceived understanding is presumably sensitive to contextually-relevant information. In three studies, I manipulated perceived understanding in order to test whether it is causally related to relationship identification.

Manipulating a relationship construct as important as perceived understanding can, however, be challenging as most individuals in romantic relationships are motivated to maintain positive views of their partner, and ultimately their relationship (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Moreover, individuals will often dismiss information that threatens their positive views of the relationship in order to protect it (e.g., Auger et al., 2016; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, & Derrick, 2015). Given that individuals assume that their partner understands them (Byrne & Blaylock, 1963; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Murray et al., 2002) and that this is a central element of their relationship (Reis et al., 2017), information suggesting that their partner does not understand them well may be especially threatening. Consequently, individuals may defend against this threat, making it particularly

difficult to create a manipulation suggesting that their partner does not understand them. In light of this challenge, I adopted two strategies. First, I used a subtle form of self-persuasion to manipulate perceived understanding in romantic relationships, the ease of retrieval paradigm. Individuals may be less likely to defend against a subtle manipulation than a more direct manipulation. Second, I examined friendships because individuals may be less defensive when presented with information suggesting that their friend does not understand them (Studies 4-5) relative to information that their romantic partner does not understand them.

In this Chapter, I will describe three experiments exploring the causal effect of perceived understanding on relationship identification in romantic relationships and friendships. Studies 3 and 4 experimentally manipulated perceived understanding using the ease of retrieval paradigm in romantic relationships and friendships. In Study 5, I tested this effect using a more direct manipulation of perceived understanding in friendships. Across all studies, I hypothesized that feeling understood by a romantic partner or a friend would lead individuals to perceive their relationship with their romantic partner or their friend as an important part of who they are (i.e., report higher levels of relationship identification).

Study 3 – Ease of Retrieval Effects on Identification in Romantic Relationships

In Study 3, I manipulated perceived understanding in romantic relationships using the ease of retrieval paradigm, a common social psychological procedure (Schwarz, Bless, Strack, Klumpp, Rittenauer-Schatka, & Simons, 1991). Numerous studies have shown that being able to easily retrieve information or generate thoughts triggers a subjective feeling of ease that can subsequently influences one's judgments (see Greifeneder, Bless, & Pham, 2011 for a review). For example, in the very first demonstration of the ease of retrieval effect, participants were asked to recall 6 assertive behaviors that they enacted recently (an easy task for most people) or 12 (a

difficult task for most people; Schwarz et al., 1991). Many experiments have shown that individuals struggle to think of 12 assertive behaviors and consequently deduce from this subjective feeling of difficulty that they are not very assertive. In contrast, individuals find it easier to think of 6 assertive behaviors and deduce from this subjective feeling of ease that they are very assertive. Thus, this line of research suggests that it is possible to experimentally influence ease of retrieval (by manipulating the number of instances to recall) and thereby one's judgment.

In light of this research, I proposed that if individuals have difficulty recalling instances in which they felt understood by their partner, then they may feel less understood by their partner. Consistent with previous studies using the ease of retrieval paradigm, participants in this study were asked to recall few or many instances in which they felt understood by their romantic partner. I predicted that individuals who struggle to report instances of partner understanding should report being less understood by their partner and less identified with the relationship. Participants were recruited to participate in a two-phase study. In Phase 1, participants completed baseline measures of relationship identification and perceived understanding. This design allowed me to increase statistical power as each participant acted as his or her own control.

Before conducting this study, I conducted two separate manipulation check studies to determine how difficult it was for individuals to recall instances in which they felt understood. For these studies, both people in a relationship and singles were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk), a website commonly used to conduct social-psychological research (Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). People in a relationship answered questions about their romantic partner, and singles answered questions about a close friend. I first examined how many instances of partner (or friend) understanding individuals could freely generate. Pretesting conducted among

romantically involved individuals ($N = 46$) indicated that 70% of the participants could freely generate between one and three instances; the modal response was three instances. No one reported more than nine instances of partner understanding. Among participants who were singles ($N = 38$), 95% of the participants could freely generate between one and three instances; the modal response was two instances. No one reported more than four. I conducted a second manipulation check study to examine how difficult it would be to generate three vs. nine instances. Romantically involved participants ($N = 46$) tended to have more difficulty generating nine instances ($M = 5.90$; $SD = 2.66$) than three instances ($M = 4.28$; $SD = 2.87$; 1 = *not at all difficult*; 10 = *very difficult*; $t(44) = -1.98$, $p = .054$). Furthermore, singles ($N = 21$) found it more difficult to generate nine instances ($M = 8.00$; $SD = 2.00$) than three ($M = 5.25$; $SD = 2.92$; $t(19) = -2.57$, $p = .019$). Thus, these findings suggest that recalling three instances may be relatively easy, whereas recalling nine instances may be relatively difficulty. However, these findings suggest that this manipulation may be more powerful for friends than partners, a point I will return to later in this chapter.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Participants who were currently involved in an exclusive romantic relationship were recruited using MTurk. Participation was restricted to U.S. and Canadian workers with a HIT approval rate of at least 95%. Three hundred and fifty-nine participants completed Phase 1, and 311 participants completed both Phase 1 and Phase 2. I excluded participants because their relationship status changed from Phase 1 to Phase 2 ($n = 6$), because they reported inconsistent information from Phase 1 to Phase 2 (e.g., a different partner's name; $n = 8$), because they stopped before completing the manipulation ($n = 13$), because they did not follow the instructions[1] ($n = 28$), because they skipped key measures in the study ($n = 29$),

because they were suspicious (n = 8), or because they failed the attention check question either in Phase 1 or in Phase 2 (n = 15; see Maniaci & Rogge, 2014). The final sample consisted of 204 participants (M_{age} = 37.20, SD = 11.65; 131 female). About twenty percent (19.1%) were exclusively dating, 14.2% were cohabiting, and 66.7% were engaged or married. The mean relationship length was 10.81 years (Mdn = 7.75 years, SD = 10.35 years). Participants received US$0.50 upon completing Phase 1 and US$2.00 upon completing Phase 2.

In Phase 1, participants were asked to indicate their partner's name. They then completed baseline measures of relationship identification and perceived understanding. In Phase 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two ease of retrieval conditions. All participants were asked to think about situations when they felt understood by their romantic partner in the past month. More specifically, they were asked to think about times when their partner understood who they truly are, their thoughts and feelings, or other things that are important to them (e.g., their needs, concerns, motivation). Participants were instructed to list either three instances (easy; n = 106) or nine instances (difficult; n = 98). Participants were presented with three or nine boxes, one for each of the instances they had to recall. Participants spent as much time as they wanted on the task. If participants in the difficult condition tried to skip the task without finishing it, a message appeared on the screen instructing them to spend a little bit more time thinking about another instance. If they could still not recall nine partner understanding instances, they were instructed to write "I cannot recall another instance" into each box that was left (see Ottati, Price, Wilson, & Sumaktoyo, 2015 for a similar procedure).

After recalling situations when they felt understood by their partner, participants completed measures of partner understanding and relationship identification. Participants were

also asked to rate how difficult it was to generate three (or nine) instances of partner understanding immediately after the manipulation.

Measures.

Phase 1 measures.

Relationship-specific identification. Participants completed 3 items from the S-RISC scale ("My romantic relationship with [partner's name] is an important reflection of who I am," "When I feel very close to [partner's name], it often feels to me like he/she is an important part of who I am" and "In general, my romantic relationship with [partner's name] is an important part of my self-image"; 1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*, $\alpha = .92$). Because participants completed Phase 1 48 hours before Phase 2, only three items of the S-RISC scale were used in order to avoid suspicion. These three items were selected because they showed the highest loadings in a similar study I conducted using an online platform similar to Mturk ($N = 256$).

Perceived understanding. Perceived understanding was assessed with one item. This item asked participants to rate themselves on a scale from 1 "*does not understand me at all*" to 9 "*completely understand me*" in response to the following statement: "On the scale below, indicate the point which best describes the degree to which your partner understands you. The middle point, 'understands me', represents how much most people feel understood by their partner. The scale gradually increases on the right side for those few who experience complete understanding in their intimate relationships and decreases on the left side for those who experience low degree of understanding." The wording for this item was adapted from an item derived from the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale that has been shown to have good reliability (Goodwin, 1992, the "magical question 31"). In a pilot study with 52 participants, this single-item measure of understanding was found to be highly correlated ($r = .74$, $p = .001$) with a scale previously used by

Cambpell and colleagues (Campbell, Lackenbauer, & Muise, 2006) tapping perceived understanding (e.g., "My partner knows me better than anyone else" and "My partner often knows what I am thinking or feeling before I say anything").

Phase 2 measures.

Perceived difficulty. After the recall task, participants were asked to indicate how difficult it was to generate 3 (vs. 9) instances in which they felt understood on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all difficult*; 10 = *very difficult*; Schwarz et al., 1991).

Perceived understanding. The same item from Phase 1 was used.

Relationship-specific identification. I used the full version of the S-RISC scale (11 items; α = .90; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks.

Perceived difficulty. An independent *t*-test (0 = easy; 1 = difficult) revealed a significant effect of the experimental manipulation on perceived difficulty. Participants who had to recall nine instances of partner understanding found the recall task more difficult (M = 5.68, SD = 3.02) than participants who had to recall three instances of partner understanding (M = 3.69, SD = 2.47, $t(187.73) = -5.14$, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = .72). The bootstrapped mean difference based on 5000 resamples indicated that the estimated difference between the two conditions was -1.99, BCa 95% CI [-2.78, -1.21]. Moreover, the vast majority of participants in the difficult condition were able to recall 9 instances; however, nine participants out of 98 reported less than 5 instances. These participants completed the task by indicating that they could not recall another instance, as instructed.

Perceived understanding. The effect of experimental condition (easy vs. difficult) was tested using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with perceived understanding at Phase 1 included as a covariate. The effect of condition was not significant, $F(1, 201) = 0.38$, $p = .54$; however, I further examined whether *perceived difficulty* was associated with perceived understanding (see Haddock, Rothman, & Schwarz, 1996; Schwarz et al., 1991; for a similar procedure). The more difficult participants found the recall task, the less understood they felt after the task, $b = -0.08$, BCa 95% CI [-0.13, -0.03], $SE = 0.02$, $t(201) = -3.56$, $p < .001$, $r = .24$, controlling for baseline perceived understanding.

Although there was a main effect of condition on perceived difficulty, there was also a lot of variability in perceived difficulty in each condition. That is, some participants found the easy task to be difficult, and other participants found the difficult task relatively easy. Therefore, *perceived difficulty* may more directly capture participants' experience of the manipulation. This could potentially explain why perceived difficulty, but not condition, predicted perceived understanding.

Relationship Identification. The ANCOVA involving experimental condition (easy vs. difficult) and participants' baseline relationship identification did not yield the expected main effect of condition, $F(1, 201) = 0.48$, $p = .49$. Because individuals may defend against the threat of *not* feeling understood (e.g., Auger et al., 2016), I chose to use a more subtle manipulation (i.e., the ease of retrieval) rather than a more direct or extreme manipulation. However, choosing a subtle manipulation also makes it more difficult to detect a direct effect. Moreover, the nature of the manipulation made it difficult to control for the content of what participants wrote: Some participants reported instances in which their partner deeply understood their inner self, whereas others reported instances in which their partner understood the kind of food they were craving.

Thus, some participants may have experienced the manipulation differently, which made it more difficult to detect the direct effect.

Several researchers have highlighted that the experimental condition can still influence the outcome indirectly even if the direct effect is not significant (Hayes, 2013; Hayes & Rockwood, 2017; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Thus, it is still possible that the experimental manipulation affected the psychological mechanisms by which ease of retrieval was expected to impact relationship identification. That is, relationship identification may have been affected *indirectly* through the effect of the manipulation on perceived difficulty. I examined this possibility using mediation analyses. Specifically, I tested whether the ease of retrieval manipulation affected perceived difficulty, which in turn influenced relationship identification while controlling for baseline identification. This mediation model was tested using a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples and generating 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes, 2013). The results showed that having to recall nine (vs. three) instances of partner understanding caused higher levels of perceived difficulty, which in turn lowered relationship identification (Figure 4)[2]. Moreover, the indirect effect of ease of retrieval condition (ease = 0; difficulty = 1) on relationship identification through perceived difficulty was significantly different from zero (indirect effect = -0.08, *SE* = 0.04, 95% CI [-0.17, -0.02]).

Based on these results, I reasoned that perceived difficulty is likely to be associated with relationship identification because having difficulty generating instances of partner understanding leads individuals to feel less understood. That is, both perceived difficulty and perceived understanding may indirectly mediate the effect of condition. To test this I modeled several indirect effects whereby the effect of ease of retrieval on relationship identification was serially

mediated by perceived difficulty and then perceived understanding, controlling for baseline identification and baseline understanding (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes 2013). The results of this serial mediation supported my prediction: The difficult condition, relative to the easy condition, caused participants to perceive greater difficulty. Increased difficulty was associated with lower levels of perceived understanding, which in turn predicted lower levels of relationship identification (Figure 5). Importantly, the indirect effect through perceived difficulty and perceived understanding was significant, *ab* = -0.02, *SE* = 0.01; 95% CI [-0.06, -0.003]. In contrast, the specific indirect effects of condition through perceived difficulty, *ab* = -0.05, *SE* = 0.04; 95% CI [-0.13, 0.02], and through perceived understanding, *ab* = 0.01, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.07] were not significant.

Overall, the results of this study provide further support that feeling understood is associated with greater relationship identification. According to the ease of retrieval heuristic (Schwarz et al., 1991; Schwarz, 1998; 2004), the easier it is for individuals to generate instances of feeling understood, the more they should report feeling understood by their partner afterwards. This in turn, I hypothesized, should impact relationship identification. Consistent with my prediction, I found that the difficult condition, relative to the easy condition, led participants to perceive greater difficulty, which was then associated with lower levels of perceived understanding. Greater perceived understanding was associated, in turn, with lower levels of relationship identification.

This study adds to the previous studies by demonstrating that judgments about interpersonal relationships or close partners may be based upon contextually salient information. It is well-known that the subjective feeling of ease or difficulty in generating thoughts or information influence judgment about the self (Caruso, 2008; Schwarz, 1998). However, little

research has examined whether ease of recall can also affect judgments of interpersonal relationships, although some evidence suggests that it might be the case. Indeed, Broemer (2001) showed that difficulty in recalling desirable relationship aspects or goals (such as making one's partner happy) undermines interpersonal closeness in romantic relationships (see also Tan & Agnew, 2016). Along the same lines, I found that difficulty in recalling instances of partner understanding is associated with less relationship identification. Thus, this study provides further evidence that individuals utilize metacognitive feelings of ease to make judgments about their relationships.

One significant caveat of this study is that the experimental manipulation did not directly affect relationship identification. However, the experimental manipulation did affect perceived difficulty, and individuals who struggled to generate instances of partner understanding reported being less understood and less identified with their romantic relationship, after controlling for baseline identification and baseline understanding. It is possible that individuals in long-term, mostly married, relationships have strong expectations that their partner understands them or not. Therefore, it may be harder to alter feelings of being understood by a romantic partner using subtle or contextual manipulation, like the ease-of-retrieval paradigm. In Study 4, I examined how this process may unfold in non-romantic relationships.

Study 4 – Ease of Retrieval Effects on Relationship Identification in Friendships

In Study 4, I extended the findings of Study 3 to friendships. When examining identification to a *specific* relationship, most research has examined this in romantic relationships. Indeed, there is now clear evidence that some individuals are more likely than others to perceive their romantic relationship as an important part of their identity (e.g., Auger et al., 2016; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). Given that romantic relationships are of fundamental importance in

adulthood, it is not surprising that interpersonal processes have been extensively studied in romantic relationships. However, the need to form positive relationships with friends is also a prominent one in adulthood (Collins & Madsen 2006), and there is some evidence that like romantic partners, close friends can be incorporated into the self-concept (Thai & Lockwood, 2015).

Although close friendships may be part of the self, recent research has shown that it may be included in one's self-concept to a lesser degree than one's romantic relationship (Thai, Lockwood, Zhu, Li, & He, in press). Consequently, it may be easier to change identification in friendship than in romantic relationship. Moreover, individuals may rely more on contextual cues when making judgments about how understood they feel by a friend. That is, they may not have a strong assumption about how well their friend understands them. Thus, how easily they can recall instances in which they felt understood may influence their judgments to a greater degree. In contrast, individuals may rely more heavily on top-down processes when making judgments about how understood they feel by their romantic partner (Holmes, 1981). Thus, contextual information may exert a weaker effect on their judgments. Therefore, I proposed that friendships provide an especially appropriate context for examining the development of relationship identification.

In Study 4, I examined whether *identification with a friendship* could be bolstered through interpersonal understanding. Indeed, having a deep meaningful conversation with a friend about critical aspects of the self (e.g., one's dreams, goals, and aspirations), and feeling understood as a result, may provide a means of building a sense of identification with this specific friendship. In Study 4, I examined, for the first time, whether feeling understood by a friend leads individuals to perceive their friendship with this person as an important part of their sense of self. The material from Study 3 was adapted to friendships.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Participants were recruited using MTurk. All participants were single and were requested to answer questions about a close friend. As in Study 3, participants were recruited to participate in a two-phase study. One hundred eighty-six participants completed Phase 1, and 148 participants completed both Phase 1 and Phase 2. I excluded participants because they reported inconsistent information from Phase 1 to Phase 2 (e.g., they did not nominate the same friend in Phase 2; $n = 39$), because they stopped before completing the manipulation ($n = 2$), because they did not follow the instructions ($n = 14$), because they were suspicious ($n = 3$), because they failed the attention check question in either Phase 1 or Phase 2 ($n = 8$), or because they skipped a key measure in the study ($n = 5$). The final sample consisted of 77 participants ($M_{age} = 38.16$, $SD = 13.70$; 41 female and 36 male). Participants received US$0.50 upon completing Phase 1 and US$2.00 upon completing Phase 2.

Participants completed the same procedure and measures as in Study 3 (easy condition $n = 33$; difficult condition $n = 44$). The adapted version of the S-RISC to friendship indicated high reliability ($\alpha = .94$, for Phase 1; and $\alpha = .93$, for Phase 2).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks.

Ease of retrieval. An independent *t*-test revealed that participants who had to recall nine instances of friend understanding found the recall task more difficult ($M = 7.39$, $SD = 2.37$) than participants who had to recall three instances of friend understanding ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 2.78$, $t(75) = -5.60$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.27$). The bootstrapped mean difference based on 5000 resamples indicated that the estimated mean difference between the two conditions was -3.30, BCa 95% CI [-4.46, -2.06].

Perceived understanding. The effect of experimental condition (easy vs. difficult) was tested using ANCOVA with perceived understanding at Phase 1 included as a covariate. Results revealed a significant effect of condition, $F(1, 74) = 4.05$, $p = .048$, $n^2_p = .05$, controlling for participants perceived understanding at Phase 1. Participants reported feeling more understood by their friend after recalling three instances, $M = 8.24$, BCa 95% CI [7.73, 8.71], than after recalling nine instances, $M = 7.64$, BCa 95% CI [7.20, 8.07], controlling for baseline perceived understanding.

Relationship Identification. The ANCOVA involving experimental condition (easy vs. difficult) and participant baseline relationship identification yielded a main effect of experimental condition, $F(1, 74) = 8.43$, $p = .005$, $n^2_p = .10$. Participants reported being more identified with their friendship after recalling three instances, $M = 5.49$, 95% BCa CI [5.22, 5.73], than after recalling nine instances, $M = 5.00$, 95% BCa CI [4.65, 5.35], controlling for baseline relationship identification[3,4].

Overall, findings from this experiment provide evidence that understanding leads to greater relationship identification among friends. Participants tended to report feeling more understood by their friend in the easy condition than in the difficult condition. Importantly, participants reported being more identified with their friendship after recalling three moments (easy) in which they felt understood by their friend than after recalling nine moments (difficult). The present results suggest that understanding in friendships can be manipulated by the ease of retrieval paradigm, and that identification to a friendship can be bolstered as a result of this manipulation. This is the first causal demonstration, to my knowledge, indicating that interpersonal understanding leads people to identify with a specific relationship.

In addition to demonstrating causality, this experiment provides evidence that this effect generalizes to a different kind of social relationship: friendships. The present results are compatible with previous research indicating that intimacy predicts friendship development (Hays, 1985; Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010). Additionally, the present findings suggest that *understanding* in particular might be a strong predictor of friendship development. Moreover, the current study suggests that the interpersonal processes associated with the development of a relational identity among romantically involved individuals may parallel the ones in friendships.

This experiment, however, has some limitations. One limitation is that the effect of the manipulation on perceived understanding was relatively small. Nevertheless, the effect of condition on relationship identification was significant and of moderate size. Moreover, the generalizability of the results could be limited by the relatively small sample size of this study. Thus, I decided to conceptually replicate the effect of understanding on relationship identification, again in friendships. I used a more direct manipulation of perceived understanding in order to provide further evidence for the proposed hypothesis and test the robustness of the effect.

Study 5 – Enhancing Perceived Understanding Through Visualization

Study 4 demonstrated that metacognitive feelings of ease or difficulty in remembering instances of understanding influence relationship identification. The objective of Study 5 was to induce feelings of being understood more directly using a visualization task. In this experiment, participants were instructed to think about a negative event or a situation that they have not shared with a friend. Participants were then asked to either imagine their friend being understanding or not. To make the experience more vivid and personally relevant, participants were asked to imagine what their friend would say that would make them feel understood or not, and how they would feel. Previous research has shown that imagining a specific interpersonal situation can elicit

similar emotional responses to real-life experience (Dadds, Bovbjerg, Redd, & Cutmore, 1997). Thus, I expected that imagining a friend being understanding (vs. not understanding) would promote understanding and relationship identification.

Method

Participants and Procedure. Participants were recruited using MTurk. Participation was restricted to U.S. and Canadian workers with a HIT approval rate of at least 95%. All participants were single and were asked to answer questions about a close friend. Two hundred and seventy-six participants completed Phase 1 and 212 participants completed both Phase 1, and Phase 2. I excluded participants because their relationship status changed from Phase 1 to Phase 2 (n = 19), because they reported inconsistent information from Phase 1 to Phase 2 (e.g., a different friend's name; n = 27), because they stopped before completing the manipulation (n = 9), because they did not follow the instructions (n = 20), because they were suspicious (n = 2), or because they failed the attention check question (Maniaci & Rogge, 2014) in either Phase 1 or Phase 2 (n = 16). The final sample consisted of 119 participants (M_{age} = 33.71, SD = 12.56; 55 female). Participants received US$0.50 upon completing Phase 1 and US$2.00 upon completing Phase 2.

In Phase 1, participants were asked to nominate a close friend. Participants then completed a baseline measure of relationship identification. In Phase 2, I manipulated understanding (low, high) using a manipulation inspired by Morelli, Torre and Eisenberger's (2014) manipulation of understanding among strangers. Participants were first asked to describe a negative event or a situation that happened in their life that is important to them, but that for one reason or another they have not shared with their friend. They were then asked to imagine that they told their friend about this event. Participants randomly assigned to the *high-understanding* condition (n = 64) were presented with the following instructions:

(1) Imagine you told your friend about this event and that he or she completely understands your reaction or your thoughts and feelings. What would this person say? Close your eyes and picture your friend and what he or she might say. Please briefly describe what your friend might say and how you would feel.

(2) Now, imagine your friend saying: "I would've reacted the same way." Take some time to picture the look on their face. Please briefly describe this and how this reaction would make you feel.

Participants randomly assigned to the *low-understanding* condition (n = 55) were presented with the following instructions:

(1) Even in good relationships, there are always times when our friends might not totally get how we feel. Imagine you told your friend about this event and that your friend does not understand your reaction or your thoughts and feelings. What would your friend say that would make you feel like they don't understand? Close your eyes and picture your friend and what he or she might say. Please briefly describe what your friend might say and how you would feel.

(2) Now, imagine your friend saying: "I don't understand why you were feeling that way." Take some time to picture the look on their face. Please briefly describe this and how would this reaction make you feel.

To further bolster the manipulation, I asked participants to indicate their agreement with statements that were compatible with the participants' experimental condition. In the high-

understanding condition, the statements were about the friend understanding them; whereas in the low-understanding condition, the statements were about times when their friend did not fully understand them. For example, one statement for the high-understanding condition was "My friend knows me better than most people." In contrast, a statement for the low-understanding condition was "There are some things that other people know better about me than my friend knows about me." Participants were asked to indicate whether they "*agree at least somewhat"* or whether they "*disagree completely*" (see Salancik, 1974, for a similar procedure). With these biased anchors, participants were expected to endorse most items. Then, participants indicated how understood they felt by their friend and completed the S-RISC scale. Finally, participants were debriefed.

Measures.

Phase 1 measures.

Relationship-specific identification. Participants completed the 11-item S-RISC scale[5] (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*, α=.92; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011).

Perceived understanding. Perceived understanding was assessed with the same item as in Study 4 (1 = *does not understand m*e *at all*, 9 = *completely understands me*).

Phase 2 measures.

Perceived understanding. The same item from Phase 1 was used.

Relationship-specific identification. I again used the full S-RISC scale (α=.93).

Results and Discussion

Perceived understanding. First, I determined whether the visualization manipulation was effective using an ANCOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect of experimental condition on perceived understanding, $F(1, 116) = 22.43$, $p = .001$, $n^2_p = .16$, controlling for participants

perceived understanding at Phase 1. Participants who were asked to imagine their friend responding in a high-understanding manner felt more understood, $M = 7.25$, BCa 95% CI [6.99, 7.50], than participants who were asked to imagine their friend not being understanding, $M = 6.33$, BCa 95% CI [5.99, 6.64].

Relationship identification. A second ANCOVA involving experimental condition (low vs. high) and participant baseline relationship identification yielded a main effect of experimental condition, $F(1, 116) = 9.81$, $p = .002$, $n^2_p = .08$. Participants who were asked to imagine their friend responding in a high-understanding manner reported being more identified with their friendship, $M = 5.07$, BCa 95% CI [4.84, 5.30], than participants who were asked to imagine their friend not being understanding, $M = 4.73$, BCa 95% CI [4.49, 4.97], controlling for participant baseline relationship identification[6].

In Study 5, I experimentally induced feelings of being understood or not understood by a friend. Participants imagined the thoughts and feelings that they would have if their friend responded in a high-understanding manner or a low-understanding manner. I found that individuals perceived their friendship as a more important part of their identity when they imagined their friend being understanding than not understanding even though many participants imagined sharing something fairly negative or embarrassing. Thus, feeling understood after sharing a negative experience may also be important in fostering identification.

Furthermore, this study shows that simply *imagining* being understood by a friend is an effective method of manipulating perceived understanding in existing relationships. This is consistent with studies showing that mentally simulating a social interaction can be powerful and influence how individuals feel about social interactions and close others (e.g., Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Crisp & Turner, 2009). However, mental simulation is not confined to psychological

experiments as a means of manipulating a construct of interest. Individuals often engage in mental simulation in their daily lives (e.g., Berntsen & Jacobsen, 2008; D'Argembeau, Renaud, & Van der Linden, 2009), and these simulations may influence their subsequent behaviours. For example, after having a dispute with her friend, Marie considers sharing what happened with her boyfriend. However, she can easily imagine how he may not understand her, and consequently she decides not to self-disclose. To the extent that mental simulation may convey increased or decreased understanding, it may have important relationship consequences in daily life.

Taken together, these studies show that feeling understood can be manipulated using two different paradigms. Moreover, in Studies 3-5, I detected change in relationship identification as a function of the manipulation and perceived understanding despite high stability in relationship identification (*rs* range between .60 and .89). Together with the previous studies, these results provide converging evidence that understanding bolsters relationship identification across different dyadic contexts.

Footnotes

[1]I examined participants' open-ended responses following the manipulation to ensure that they understood and followed the instructions. I found that some participants in the easy condition reported fewer than three instances. Other participants did not describe instances in which they felt understood but simply listed adjectives such as lovely and happy or life domains such as work, going out, and vehicles. Moreover, some participants reported instances in which they did not feel understood instead of instances in which they did feel understood. Participants who do not follow the instructions have been found to increase statistical noise, and thus to decrease statistical power (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013; Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). For this reason, these participants were excluded from the analysis.

[2]It is possible that individuals who reported feeling highly understood by their partner at baseline were less likely to use the ease with which examples of understanding came to mind to make judgments about their relationship. Thus, perceived difficulty may be more important for people who were low in understanding. Exploratory analyses on the role of baseline perceived understanding were performed and are reported in Appendix B.

[3]Given the relatively small sample size for this study, I decided to complement my analyses with Bayesian statistics to determine the probability that the postulated model is true. Bayes factors can be used to determine how likely H0 or H1 is, given the data. I conducted a Bayesian ANCOVA with JASP following Wagenmakers et al.'s (2018) recommendation. Results indicated that the model including the experimental condition and baseline identification was preferred to the model including only baseline identification by a factor of 8.13 ($BF_{10} = 8.13$). In other words, the data are 8.13 more likely under the model that includes the effect of the experimental condition, rather than the model that excludes it. This indicates moderate evidence in

favor of the model including the effect of the experimental condition (Jeffreys, 1961; see also Kass & Raftery, 1995 for an interpretation of Bayes factors).

[4]One could wonder whether relationship identification may have been affected indirectly through the effect of the manipulation on perceived understanding. Exploratory mediation analyses were conducted and are reported in Appendix C.

[5]Given that the two study phases were one week apart, I decided to use the full scale (i.e., the 11-item scale) in order to have a more reliable measure and increase my ability to detect changes.

[6]As in Study 4, I examined whether condition indirectly affected relationship identification through perceived understanding. Results are reported in Appendix D.

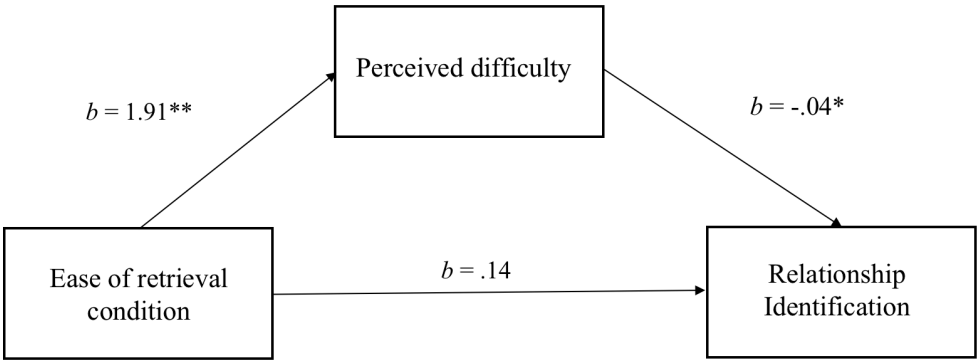


Figure 4. The indirect effect of ease of retrieval condition (ease = 0; difficulty = 1) on relationship identification through perceived difficulty (Study 3)

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

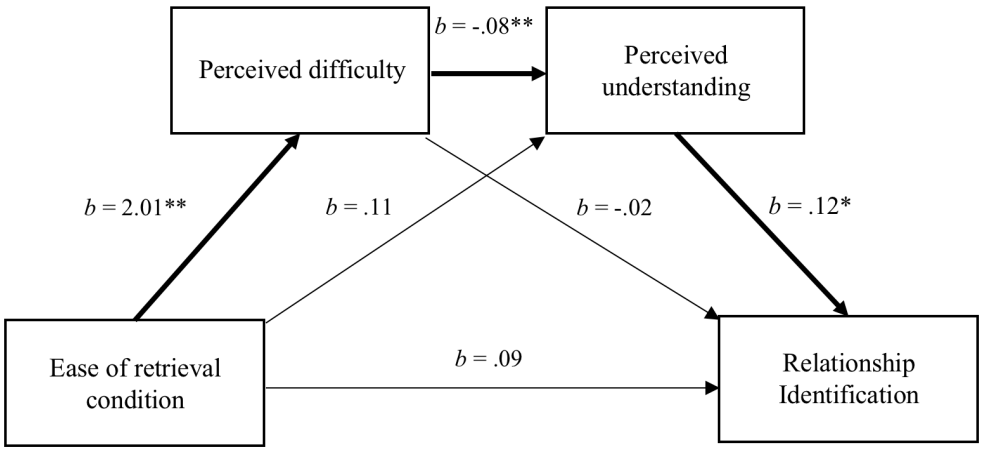


Figure 5. Serial mediation model (Study 3)

Bolded paths represent the indirect effect of interest. This analysis controls for Time 1 relationship identification and Time 1 perceived understanding. Condition is 0 for the ease condition and 1 for the difficult condition. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

$^{*}p < .01$. $^{**}p < .001$.

Transition from Chapter 3 to Chapter 4

My aim with the research presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 was to understand how people come to identify with a relationship. In 5 studies using experimental, survey, and longitudinal methods, I showed that when individuals feel understood by a romantic partner or a friend, they perceive their relationship with their partner or that specific friend as an important part of who they are. Taken together, these studies provide the first evidence that a s*pecific social experience*, feeling understood, promotes relationship identification.

The research presented in Chapter 4 focuses on how highly identified individuals view their relationship when negative relationship events occur. Although studies have shown that relationship identification is associated with pro-relationship strategies in the laboratory (Auger et al., 2016; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011), it is unclear how individuals react when negative relationship events occur on a daily basis. Because the relationship is centrally important to highly identified individuals, they may be especially hurt by their partner's transgression in everyday life. However, they may still be motivated maintain an overall positive view of the relationship. In Chapter 4, I answered this question by examining a crucial aspect in interpersonal relationships: partners' transgressions.

Chapter 4 – Daily Diary and Experience Sampling Study

Daily Experiences and Relationship Well-being: The Paradoxical Effects of Relationship Identification

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Abstract

Objective. Even couples in healthy romantic relationships experience conflict at times. I examine whether relationship identification (the extent to which the relationship is incorporated into the self) predicts immediate reactivity to partner transgressions and also promotes global resilience over time. **Method.** Sixty-three couples participated in a two-week event-contingent diary study. **Results.** On a daily basis, experiencing more partner transgressions than usual predicted decreases in relationship well-being and increases in negative affect. This within-person association was stronger for those high in relationship identification. However, after two weeks, changes in global relationship evaluations of low identifiers, but not of high identifiers, were contingent on the accumulation of partner transgressions and the degree of negative affect in response to these daily transgressions. **Conclusions.** This study suggests that internalizing a relationship into the self does not blind intimates to immediate negative events but rather provides a basis for their global relationship evaluations that is not contingent on recent events.

Keywords: romantic relationships, transgressions, daily experiences, relationship identification, relationship well-being

Daily Experiences and Relationship Well-being: The Paradoxical Effects of Relationship Identification

One of the ironies of increased closeness and interdependence in romantic relationships is increased opportunities for our romantic partners to fail us. Recent research suggests that commitment moderates the immediate and subsequent relational consequences of partner transgressions (Li & Fung, 2013). It was shown that in the short-term, commitment exacerbates the harmful effect of negative interactions on relationship satisfaction but, in the long-term, it alleviates the consequences of negative interactions. I expect the specific motivational basis for commitment to matter in the face of negative relationship events. I adopt a relational theory of the self and examine the motivation to maintain a relationship because it is personally valued, meaningful, and a reflection of the self, namely *relationship identification,* and compared it to another positive relationship-specific motivation. I propose that seeing the relationship as a central aspect of the self heightens one's immediate reactivity to partner's transgressions, but at the same time, the self-relevance and care for the relationship motivates people to remain resilient and not carry a bad day forward in their global judgments of relationship satisfaction.

Immediate Reactivity to Day-to-Day Changes in Negative Relationship Events

Intimates can be quite reactive to fluctuations in daily relationship experiences (Neff & Karney, 2005). On conflict-ridden days, romantic partners feel less satisfied with their relationship and not as close to their partner compared to other days (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982). Not only do people feel worse about the relationship when their partner behaves negatively toward them, they also experience greater hurt feelings (Leary et al., 1998; Lemay et al., 2012). Moreover, individuals often report feeling angry, upset, and/or sad (Feeney, 2005). As such, it appears that experiencing more transgressions than

usual may impact daily evaluations of the relationship and momentarily increase negative affect, such as anger. There is also evidence indicating that one's overall motivation to maintain the relationship – one's level of relationship commitment – amplifies one's negative reactions. Lemay et al. (2012) found that feeling devalued by one's partner elicits greater hurt feelings among highly committed individuals than less committed individuals. Recently, Li and Fung (2013) found in a diary study that commitment predicted greater daily reactivity to reports of negative interactions that day. Thus, it appears that one's acute response to heightened perception of conflict or partner transgressions is fairly negative, and this is especially the case if individuals are highly committed to the relationship.

However, two individuals might have similar levels of commitment, but their underlying motives may differ. One could be motivated to maintain a relationship because the relationship is satisfying (Blais et al., 1990; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), because it is something that one ought to do (Frank & Brandstatter, 2002; Johnson, 1991), or because it reflects one's identity (Brickman, 1987; Lydon et al., 1997). Indeed, commitment is a relatively broad, multifaceted construct (Holmes, 1981) that covers various relationship-specific motives (Blais et al., 1990). Presumably, the specific motives that fuel a person's commitment is likely to influence how they respond when their partner transgresses. For example, if a person maintains a relationship because it is typically enjoyable and fun (i.e., for intrinsic reasons), then he or she might dismiss a specific negative event as an anomaly or an exception. In contrast, if the relationship is personally valued and a central part of one's identity, then negative events may have a more negative impact because they are of more consequence for the self. That is, negative relationship events may also represent a threat to the self (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Consequently, individuals who consider their relationship as a central part of the self (i.e., high identifiers) may

be especially upset and feel less satisfied with their relationship on days when their partner behaves worse than usual toward them.

Reactivity to Accumulated Negative Events Over Time

Relationship identification may predict greater sensitivity to daily increases in partner transgressions, but what happens when partner transgressions accumulate over a period of time? If intimates were asked to evaluate their relationship as a whole, days later, would they rely on their recent experiences? It seems reasonable to anticipate that the accumulation of negative daily experiences will erode overall levels of relationship satisfaction over time. Some evidence suggests that intimates who are experiencing more negative relationship events, as opposed to less, tend to report greater distress and lower relationship quality (Jacobson et al., 1982). Moreover, intimate's heightened reactivity to specific daily relationship events tends to erode overall levels of relationship satisfaction over time (Arriaga, 2001; Jacobson et al., 1982).

Yet when the relationship is a core part of the self, individuals are motivated to maintain their relationship (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011). As such, high identifiers may find ways to maintain their *overall* conviction that their relationship is good, despite experiencing a relatively high number of partner transgressions over time. Although high identifiers may display greater reactivity when their partner behaves worse than usual on a given day, I expect less of an effect over time – when asked to evaluate the relationship as a whole. When making global judgments of the relationship (e.g., Overall, I am satisfied with my relationship), one could take a data-driven approach that incorporates recent events and reactivity to such events, or one might take a top-down approach and make global judgments based on one's overarching assumptions and motives (Holmes, 1981). I expect identification in particular to matter in determining the approach taken. If one's relationship is based on it being meaningful and reflecting one's values, then overall

levels of relationship satisfaction should be less contingent on recent events. Indeed, the relationship is not in question, and as such, individuals may rely on their beliefs and broader relationship goals when making overall judgments about the relationship. In other words, high identifiers may separate their global relationship judgments from recent experiences in order to protect their relationship (Neff & Karney, 2005). In contrast, low identifiers may think more concretely as to why they are staying in their relationship. Therefore, when judging the overall quality of their relationship, they may focus on their recent relationship experiences. The overall satisfaction of low identifiers may therefore be contingent on these events.

Accordingly, high identifiers may be immediately hurt after their partner transgressed more and report less positive daily relationship evaluations. At the daily level, when a person encounters more transgressions from his or her partner than usual, this negative experience is salient to that person and is likely to impact his or her emotional state and daily appraisal of the relationship (e.g., Today, I did not *feel close* to my partner). The more specific, immediate, and concrete the experience is the more one simply feels the pain, hurt, and disappointment in the moment. However, this negative specific feeling about the relationship may not linger, accumulate, or generalize to their global relationship evaluations over time. I expect relationship identification to intensify daily reactivity but also to motivate relationship resilience days later, an idea that is consistent with Li and Fung's (2013) findings.

Overview of the Present Research

Overall, the purpose of this study is to replicate and extend previous findings on the paradoxical short-term and long-term effects of commitment on responses to negative relationship events (Li & Fung, 2013) and thereby advance theoretical understanding of the functions of specific motivational bases of commitment. To do so, an event-contingent diary study with dating

couples was conducted. I investigated responses to partner's negative behaviors on a daily basis and over time, as well as how specific motivational bases of commitment may moderate one's responses. Specifically, I focused on two motivational bases for commitment: relationship identification and intrinsic motivation. Although both identification and intrinsic motivation are positively valenced and linked to various positive outcomes in interpersonal relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008; Knee et al., 2005; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanayakkara, & Neighbors, 2002), I propose that it is one's strong binding of oneself to the relationship that will be important in determining how individuals regulate negative relationship events.

The current study aimed to address two questions. First, is relationship identification associated with greater daily reactivity in the face of partner transgressions? I examined the within-person associations between day-to-day variation in partner transgressions and daily relationship well-being and daily negative affect. These within-person associations capture how reactive one is to changes in partner's behaviors. I propose that experiencing greater partner transgressions than usual is typically related to decreases in daily relationship well-being and increases in negative affect, but that relationship identification amplifies this association (Hypothesis 1). I also tested for the effects of commitment and intrinsic motivation.

Second, is the accumulation of negative events associated with declines in satisfaction over a more extended period of time? Experiencing partner transgressions over time may lead to a decrease in global judgments of relationship satisfaction for some people, but this association may be weaker for others. I hypothesized that experiencing partner transgressions across two weeks will be associated with a decrease in global relationship satisfaction for low identifiers but that, over time, high identifiers will maintain their high level of global relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). Again, I tested for the effects of commitment and intrinsic motivation. Another

question I explored is whether daily emotional reactivity (i.e., the degree of negative affect in response to daily transgressions) predicts change in global relationship satisfaction over two weeks. I tested whether it is simply the accumulation of partner transgressions that lowers satisfaction in low identifiers over time, or whether the emotional reactivity of low identifiers to these transgressions is also relevant in decreasing satisfaction (Exploratory Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

Eighty heterosexual couples were recruited from a university student population to participate in an initial lab session, a two-week experience sampling and nightly diary study, and a closing lab session in exchange for $100 each. Seventeen couples were excluded because they failed to complete parts of the study (i.e., the interaction record, the nightly diary, or the closing lab session). Our final sample comprised 63 couples (*M* age = 21.60 years, *SD* = 2.79; *M* relationship length = 21.01 months, *SD* = 22.19). The original sample and the final sample did not differ significantly in terms of age, relationship length, relationship motives, or relationship satisfaction. All participants indicated their relationship status and partners from three couples seemed to disagree with each other. Ninety participants reported that they were dating, 29 reported that they were cohabiting, and seven reported that they were engaged or married. Post-hoc power analysis indicated that the power to detect the interaction effect was .94 and .86 for the two primary daily analyses, and .54 and .82 for the two primary two-week analyses.

Procedure and Measures

During the initial lab session (Time 1), small groups of couples were given instructions on how to complete their paper-and-pencil materials. Participants were instructed to carry their interaction record booklets with them at all times and to complete their records in private as soon

as possible after a *positive or negative event* happened between them and their partner. Participants were asked not to discuss either their entries or the study with their partner until they had completed the study. During the Time 1 session, participants also completed the pretest questionnaire, a social cognition task and two additional sets of measures designed by two other research labs. The interaction records and nightly diaries began the following day for 14 consecutive days. Participants completed one interaction record every time their partner committed a transgression. Although not the focus of this study, participants also completed an interaction record whenever they or their partner did something positive[1]. At night, participants completed materials that assessed relationship well-being and negative affect for that day. An experimenter called each participant after 7 days to ensure that they were not experiencing any difficulty in completing their materials. Participants returned to the lab within 3 days of completing their 14-day interaction records and nightly diaries. During the Time 2 session, participants handed in their materials, were administered the same global relationship satisfaction measure as at Time 1, were compensated and debriefed.

Relationship identification (Time 1). Participants' identification was assessed with items from Blais et al.'s (1990) Couple Motivation Questionnaire and Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna's (1985) Measure of Motivation for Maintaining the Relationship, supplemented by items generated by graduate students studying SDT. Respondents read 7 statements (e.g., "I am in my relationship because I value my life as a couple;" "Because my life feels more complete with my partner") and indicated the extent to which they reflected their own reasons for being in their relationship (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree;* $\alpha = .79$). To test for discriminant validity, participants completed 5 items related to intrinsic motivation (e.g., "I am in my relationship because just being with my partner is enjoyable," $\alpha = .80$)[2].

Relationship commitment (Time 1). Participants' commitment was assessed with the 6-item Assessment of Relationship Commitment Scale (ARC scale; Gagné & Lydon, 2003). Participants indicated the extent to which they felt committed to, attached to, devoted to, loyal to, dedicated to, and invested in their relationship (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *completely,* $\alpha = .91$).

Global relationship satisfaction (Time 1 and 2). Participants' relationship satisfaction was assessed with three items from the ARC scale (Gagné & Lydon, 2003). Participants indicated the extent to which they felt enthusiastic, enjoyed, and were satisfied with their relationship (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *completely*; Time 1 and 2 αs = .77 and .85, respectively).

Partner transgressions (Interaction record). Participants were asked to fill out one record every time their partner committed a transgression. A transgression was defined as "When your partner enacted a negative behavior towards you. For example, he/she did something that violated your expectations of how someone should behave in a relationship." Participants wrote the date and time of the event and what happened in detail. On a given day, I then identified whether a partner transgression occurred or not (0 or 1). Partner transgressions that occurred in this sample included leaving the participant's family dinner to join friends, accidentally downloading a virus on the participant's computer, and interrupting the participant's joke.

Daily relationship well-being (Nightly diaries). Each night, happiness toward the relationship, closeness, and intimacy were assessed. Happiness was assessed with one item derived from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Goodwin, 1992). Participants indicated their degree of happiness, everything considered, in their relationship with their partner *today.* Closeness was assessed with two items: (1) the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS, Aron et al., 1992) where participants were asked to indicate which circles (from 1 = circles with little overlap between the self and the partner to 7 = circles with a high degree of overlap) best described their

relationship that day, and (2) the face valid question: the extent to which they *felt close* to their partner in their interaction with their partner that day (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very*). Intimacy (as defined by Reis & Patrick, 1996) was assessed with three items. Participants indicated the extent to which in their interaction with their partner today, they felt cared for, accepted/validated, and understood (1 = *not at all*, 5 = v*ery*; α = .89). Measures were standardized and averaged in order to create a composite score of daily relationship well-being (α = .89).

Daily negative affect (Nightly diaries). Each night, participants indicated the extent to which they felt a negative mood that day (i.e., frustrated, depressed, unhappy, worried/anxious, and angry/hostile; 1 = *almost never*, 5 = *almost always;* α = .86; Diener & Emmons, 1984).

Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Predicting Daily Relationship Well-being and Negative Affect

I predicted that high identifiers, compared to low identifiers, would report a greater decrease in daily relationship well-being and a greater increase in negative affect when they perceived more partner transgressions than usual (Hypothesis 1). In order to take into account the non-independence of observations from the same person and from the same couple, the data were analyzed using the over-time standard actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This statistical procedure allowed me to test for mutual interdependence between partners by estimating actor and partner effects. In this analysis, the criterion is always the actor's daily relationship well-being. An actor effect occurs if Mary's level of relationship identification and Mary's report of Max's behaviors predicts her daily relationship well-being. A partner effect occurs if Max's level of identification and Max's report of Mary's behaviors predicts *Mary*'s daily relationship well-being. The SAS procedure PROC MIXED was used.

Because I was interested in daily reactivity (i.e., how daily appraisals covary with perceptions of daily relationship events within a given individual) and how relationship identification might moderate this within-person effect, it was important to separate the between-person effect from the within-person effect. Partner transgression was thus centered around each participant mean (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). For each person, I calculated the average number of transgression days over all 14 days (i.e., the proportion of days on which a partner transgression occurred) and this person-specific mean was then subtracted from the daily codes (0, 1) for partner transgression (see Enders & Tofighi, 2007 for details about centering). This allowed me to examine whether being high on a given day in partner transgressions relative to one's own mean rating (i.e., an average day) predicts daily level of relationship well-being. Person-level predictors (e.g., actor's and partner's levels of relationship identification) were grand-mean centered.

To test my daily reactivity hypothesis, variation in partner transgression was added to the model to predict daily outcomes. Relationship identification was added in the model to predict between-person differences in mean level of daily relationship well-being (i.e., the effect of relationship identification on daily relationship well-being on an average day) and between-person differences in within-person effects (i.e., the effect of partner transgressions on daily relationship well-being). Finally, a variable that codes for the time point was entered in the model. A random effect for the intercept was estimated, thereby allowing mean levels of daily relationship well-being to vary across couples. The random effects also included the variance in the actors' and partners' slopes in partner transgression and the covariance between actors' and partners' slopes and intercepts. This model allows the errors to be autocorrelated, which means that the model takes into account that an individual's level of relationship well-being on a given day is correlated with that person's relationship well-being the previous day. In regard to the degrees of freedom,

the Satterthwaite approximation was used as this method is well-suited for multilevel models (Kenny et al., 2006). I first created a model including gender (1 and -1 for men and women, respectively) and its interactions with the predictor variables. Gender did not qualify the interactions between relationship identification and partner transgressions. Adding gender into the model did not change our results[3]. The dyads were therefore treated as indistinguishable.

Daily relationship well-being (actor effects). As shown in Table 4, partner transgression was associated with decreased daily relationship well-being: Mary reported less daily relationship well-being on days when she reported that her partner, Max, behaved worse than usual. There was also a significant effect of relationship identification, such that high identifiers had higher daily relationship well-being than low identifiers on an average day. Finally, actor's level of relationship identification moderated the relationship between partner transgressions and daily relationship well-being: the higher one's identification level, the greater the negative association between partner transgressions and daily relationship well-being. Simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) indicated that high identifiers (+1 *SD*) reported less daily relationship well-being when their partner behaved worse as opposed to better, $b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(108) = -7.19$, $p < .001$, $r = .57$. Low identifiers (-1 *SD*) also reported less relationship well-being on high transgression days, but to a lesser extent, $b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(84.7) = -3.21$, $p = .002$, $r = .33$; Figure 5[4]. I also tested the effects of relationship identification at high (+1 *SD*) and low transgressions (-1 *SD*). On low transgression days, high identifiers reported greater relationship well-being than low identifiers, $b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(99.6) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, $r = .50$. On high transgression days, high identifiers reported greater relationship well-being than low identifiers, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(114) = 2.47$, $p = .015$, $r = .23$, but this difference was reduced significantly[5].

Daily negative affect (actor effects). I obtained a parallel pattern of results for negative affect: A main effect emerged for partner transgressions and relationship identification. Importantly, actor's level of relationship identification moderated the relationship between partner transgressions and negative affect. Simple slope analyses revealed that high identifiers reported increased negative affect when their partner behaved worse than usual, $b = 0.52$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(106) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, $r = .50$. Low identifiers reported increased negative affect on high transgression days, but to a lesser extent, $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(83.1) = 2.49$, $p = .015$, $r = .26$; Figure 6. On low transgression days, high identifiers reported less negative affect than low identifiers, $b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(148) = -3.48$, $p < .001$, $r = .28$. On high transgression days, high identifiers and low identifiers did not differ from each other, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(167) = -0.43$ $p = .667$, $r = .03$.

My hypothesis posits that day-to-day variation in partner's behaviour predicts daily appraisals (within-person effect) and that relationship identification (a person-level variable) moderates this within-person effect. I found that this cross-level interaction was significant for both daily relationship well-being and daily negative affect. However, one could also consider whether experiencing a higher number of transgression days in total across two weeks relative to the average person predicts overall level of daily relationship well-being and overall level of negative affect across individuals high and low in relationship identification (the between-person effect). I examined within-person and between-person effects simultaneously. The between-person interaction was not significant and the within-person interaction remained significant.

Daily partner effects. Individuals experienced decreased relationship well-being and increased negative affect on days when they behaved worse than usual (as reported by their partner). Individuals experienced steeper drops in daily relationship well-being when they behaved worse than usual toward a high identifier. I did not find any actor-partner effects.

Discriminant validity. First, I tested whether relationship commitment moderated the relationship between partner transgressions and daily outcomes. Consistent with Li and Fung (2013), I found a significant interaction effect of actor's commitment and actor's perception of partner transgressions on daily relationship well-being, b = -0.13, SE = 0.06, $t(208) = -2.04$, p = .043, r = .14. The link between partner transgressions and daily relationship well-being was stronger for highly committed individuals, b = -0.57, SE = 0.09, $t(102) = -6.19$, $p < .001$, r = .52, than for less committed individuals, b = -0.35, SE = 0.09, $t(76.2) = -4.05$, $p < .001$, r = .42. When commitment and relationship identification were both included as predictors of daily relationship well-being, the interaction effect of actor's commitment and actor's perception of partner transgressions was no longer significant, b = 0.02, SE = 0.08, $t(208) = 0.27$, p = .789, r = .02. More importantly, the interaction of actor's relationship identification and actor's perception of partner transgressions was still significant, b = -0.21, SE = 0.07, $t(368) = -2.90$, p = .004, r = .15. With respect to negative affect, the interaction effect of actor's commitment and actor's perception of partner transgressions was not significant, b = 0.11, SE = 0.06, $t(190) = 1.68$, p = .094, r =.12. The interaction of actor's identification and actor's perception of partner transgressions was still significant, b = 0.19, SE = 0.07, $t(306) = 2.56$, p = .011, r = .14 , when controlling for commitment.

Second, I tested the discriminant validity of relationship identification, distinguishing it from intrinsic motives. I redid the analyses while including actor and partner effects for relationship identification and intrinsic motives. Participants with higher intrinsic motives reported greater daily relationship well-being, b = 0.29, SE = 0.08, $t(86) = 3.84$, $p < .001$, r = .38, and less daily negative affect, b = -0.24, SE = 0.07, $t(124) = -3.43$, $p < .001$, r = .29. Intrinsic motives did not moderate the relationship between partner transgressions and daily outcomes

(actor effects for relationship well-being: $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(306) = 0.28$, $p = .782$, $r = .02$; and for negative affect: $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(284) = 1.21$, $p = .226$, $r = .07$). The interaction of actor's relationship identification and actor's perception of partner transgressions still predicted daily relationship well-being, $b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(335) = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $r = .16$, but the effect was no longer significant for negative affect, $b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(308) = 1.64$, $p = .10$, $r = .09$, when controlling for intrinsic motives. Three of the four analyses provide support for the unique predictive validity of relationship identification in predicting reactivity to daily negative relationship events and none of the four showed unique effects for alternatives.

What Happens Over Time?

Although high relationship identifiers may be more reactive to changes in negative events in the moment, I theorized that their global relationship satisfaction might be more resilient to negative events over time relative to low identifiers (Hypothesis 2). I examined *change in global relationship satisfaction* over the two-week period. I conducted a multilevel analysis (individuals nested within couples) with actor effects as predictors. The frequency of partner transgressions reported over the two-week period, relationship identification, and the interaction term were entered into the model as predictors, while controlling for relationship satisfaction assessed at Time 1. Predictors were grand-mean centered. I also did the analysis with partner effects to control for mutual influence between couple members. No partner or gender effect emerged as significant in the following analysis and the results were unchanged with these in the model. Therefore, the dyads were treated as indistinguishable.

As shown in Table 5, there was a main effect of relationship identification on global relationship satisfaction, revealing that higher levels of identification were associated with greater relationship satisfaction after the diary study, while controlling for prior level of relationship

satisfaction. No main effect emerged for partner transgression frequency. However, and as expected, I obtained an interaction between relationship identification and partner transgression frequency predicting change in global relationship satisfaction (Figure 7). Low identifiers experienced decreased levels of global relationship satisfaction if they reported frequent partner transgressions over the two-week period, $b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(120) = -2.46$, $p = .016$, $r = .22$. For high identifiers, global relationship satisfaction was not reliably altered by partner transgression frequency, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(121) = 0.50$, $p = .620$, $r = .05$. I also tested the effects of relationship identification at low and high partner transgression frequency. At low partner transgression frequency, relationship identification was not associated with global relationship satisfaction, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(120) = 0.13$, $p = .900$, $r = .01$, but at high partner transgression frequency, relationship identification was positively associated with change in global relationship satisfaction, $b = 0.44$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(116) = 3.23$, $p = .002$, $r = .29$.

Discriminant validity. I tested whether commitment moderated the relationship between partner transgression frequency and change in global relationship satisfaction over time. The main effect of commitment was significant, revealing that highly committed individuals were more satisfied two weeks later, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(108) = 3.76$, $p = .003$, $r = .34$, but the interaction between partner transgression frequency and commitment was not significant, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(121) = -.17$, $p = .865$, $r = .02$. I discuss potential reasons for this in the discussion. Furthermore, when commitment and relationship identification were both included as predictors, the interaction of relationship identification and partner transgression frequency still predicted change in global relationship satisfaction, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(117) = 2.12$, $p = .036$, $r = .19$.

I redid the analyses adding intrinsic motives and its interaction term with partner transgression frequency. There was no main effect for intrinsic motives, and it did not interact

with partner transgression frequency. Relationship identification interacted with transgressions to predict change in satisfaction, b = 0.11, SE = 0.05, $t(116) = 2.04$, p = .044, r = .19, with a significant simple slope for low identifiers, b = -0.16, SE = 0.06, $t(118) = -2.66$, p = .007, r = .24.

Exploratory Analyses. I also tested whether the degree of negative affect in response to daily transgressions predicted change in global relationship satisfaction, for low identifiers but not for high identifiers (Exploratory Hypothesis 3). First, I estimated the within-person random slope (i.e., the best linear unbiased predictor; Moser, 2004) linking partner transgression days to daily negative affect. The random slope represents how much each person experienced negative affect in response to partner transgressions (i.e., daily emotional reactivity). To obtain the random slopes, I conducted a multilevel model predicting daily negative affect from an intercept term and the random effect of daily partner transgressions (person-centered). I then saved the solution for the random effects, and used the estimates of the random slopes as an individual difference measure. This analysis allows me to determine whether the process at the daily level (i.e., how reactive people are when they experience more partner transgressions than usual) predicts change in global relationship satisfaction two weeks later. To predict change in global relationship satisfaction, daily emotional reactivity (i.e., the transgression to daily negative affect random slopes), relationship identification, and the interaction term were entered into the model. The dyads were treated as indistinguishable and similar results were obtained when controlling for gender and partner effects.

I found a main effect of relationship identification on relationship satisfaction, revealing that high identifiers reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction after the diary study, while controlling for prior levels of relationship satisfaction (Table 3). No main effect emerged for daily emotional reactivity. However, and as expected, daily emotional reactivity interacted with

relationship identification to predict change in global relationship satisfaction two weeks later (Figure 7)[6]. Daily emotional reactivity predicted decreases in global relationship satisfaction for low identifiers, b = -1.01, SE = 0.35, $t(110)$ = -2.87, p = .005, r = .26, but not for high identifiers, b = 0.32, SE = 0.34, $t(119)$ = .94, p = .348, r = .09. I also tested the effects of relationship identification at low and high daily reactivity. At low reactivity, relationship identification was not associated with change in global relationship satisfaction, b = 0.07, SE = 0.13, $t(119)$ = .57, p = .569, r = .05, but at high reactivity, relationship identification was positively associated with change in global relationship satisfaction, b = 0.56, SE = 0.15, $t(113)$ = 3.88, $p < .001$, r = .34.

Discussion

The overarching goal of the current study was to examine how one can recognize and feel the immediate hurt of a partner's transgression while maintaining the general conviction that the relationship is good. I found that relationship identification predicts this relationship regulation process. Findings revealed that experiencing more transgression than usual on a given day predicted decreased daily relationship well-being and increased negative affect and that relationship identification amplified these within-person associations. Despite this immediate reactivity, high identifiers were less sensitive to their partner transgressions days later. For low identifiers, experiencing more transgressions than the average participant was associated with decreased relationship satisfaction over time. In contrast, high identifiers maintained their overall level of relationship satisfaction independent of recent events. Moreover, for low identifiers, the degree to which partner transgressions elicited negative affect on a daily basis predicted changes in global relationship satisfaction two weeks later. Thus, over time, recent daily experiences map onto global relationship evaluations for low identifiers, but high identifiers were buffered against recent relationship experiences in making their global evaluations. Taken together, these two sets

of findings reveal a dual relationship regulation process by individuals high in identification. Although they are sensitive to their immediate relationship experiences, they do not experience lingering effects. Instead, they maintain their general positive feelings about the relationship.

These findings are consistent with and extend earlier findings on commitment (Li & Fung, 2013). I found the same seemingly paradoxical pattern that they found – commitment is associated with both short-term detrimental effects and longer-term protective effects. Although this pattern may seem surprising, two independent labs in Hong Kong and Montreal have found similar results, attesting to the reliability of the findings. In this study, I was able to (1) probe further into the underlying motivational basis for the commitment findings, (2) assess both members of the couple, (3) assess negative daily events separate from evening assessments of current affect and relationship well-being, and (4) assess whether the daily effects dissipate as quickly as two weeks rather than 7 months later. In terms of commitment, I replicated Li and Fung's (2013) findings on a daily basis but not over time. This may be related to the fact that change in global relationship satisfaction was assessed a few days after the completion of the diary study rather than 7 months later. Commitment is a broad motivation that encompasses various motives. Motives other than identification, such as intrinsic motivation, may not motivate global relationship resilience in the aftermath of recent negative events but might motivate positive relationship experiences over a longer period of time that enhance relationship satisfaction.

Immediate Reactions to Partner Transgressions and Relationship Satisfaction Over Time

The increased reactivity to daily negative events is consistent with research on self-concordant goals showing how conditions that impede or threaten a personally meaningful goal may temporarily impair subjective well-being (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Similarly, I found that when a romantic relationship is an important part of one's self, partner transgression triggers an

increase in negative feelings. Because high identifiers personally care about their relationship, negative events have weight and are of consequence for the self. High identifiers might also expect fewer transgressions from their partner so when it does happen, the contrast between expectations and reality might be larger, thereby influencing daily appraisals to a larger extent.

The current findings are also consistent with research showing that individuals more easily endorse a positively biased view of their relationship when asked to evaluate their relationship in global terms rather than in more specific terms (McNulty & Karney, 2001). When individuals evaluate their relationship as a whole, they can choose from a wide range of behaviors and examples to maintain their desired positive view of the relationship. In contrast, when they evaluate specific aspects of their relationship (e.g., Today, I did not *feel close* to my partner), presumably there are fewer behaviors and examples to choose from, making it more difficult to maintain a positive view of the relationship. As such, individuals might hold a positive view of their relationship and their partner as a whole, but still acknowledge *specific* negative qualities of their partner (Neff & Karney, 2005). Nevertheless, holding a general positive view of the relationship that is insensitive to recent events might signal a neglect of issues (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008) and in an abusive relationship, such bias might be particularly detrimental.

It seems more difficult for low identifiers to transcend recent negative experiences when evaluating their relationship as a whole. This finding extends the knowledge of how individuals make judgments about their relationship. Holmes (1981) distinguished between bottom-up and top-down relationship judgments. A bottom-up view suggests that when judging whether they are happy with their relationship, individuals engage in a mental calculation and sum moments of joy and sadness. My findings suggest that low identifiers might engage in a bottom-up approach when evaluating how they globally feel about the relationship.

Relationship Motives

The current findings suggest that the reasons why people pursue their relationship have implications for relationship maintenance processes. Whereas commitment reflects one's general intention to persist (Rusbult, 1983), the specific reasons for persisting in a relationship vary (Blais et al., 1990; Johnson, 1991; Lydon et al., 1997; Rempel et al., 1985). Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a useful framework to delineate the motivational basis of commitment (Blais et al., 1990). According to SDT, the specific reasons or motives that drive a person to pursue a goal (in this case, to continue a relationship) reside along a continuum of self-determination. A person may commit because the relationship has been pleasant, enjoyable, and satisfying (Blais et al., 1990) or because the relationship reflects one's identity (Brickman, 1987; Burke & Reitzes, 1991) and values (moral commitment; Johnson, 1991; Lydon et al., 1997). This study represents an important step toward differentiating the implications of various motives that may fuel a person's commitment. I showed unique effects for relationship identification (i.e., being committed to a relationship because it's a central part of the self) predicting how people experience and manage daily negative relationship events. Intrinsic motivation (i.e., being committed to a relationship because it's enjoyable) did not have the same effects. Moreover, relationship identification predicted intimates' responses to specific negative events above and beyond relationship commitment. Therefore, distinguishing the motivational basis of commitment might help researchers better understand how individuals regulate their experience within their relationships, a point that should be considered in future studies.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research raises questions pertaining to the mechanisms underlying the effect of relationship identification on relationship well-being. High identifiers may experience immediate

distress about a relationship threat, but they may have the capacity to flexibly move from the concrete specifics of the event to the broader motives and goals of the relationship. It would be interesting in future research to examine the factors that facilitate this dynamic process. Other mechanisms may also account for the findings observed over time. High identifiers may remember their partner's transgressions in a way that protects their overall judgment of satisfaction. Although transgressions might be salient and personally relevant when they happen, over time, high identifiers may exhibit relationship-promoting memory biases regarding transgressions (Luchies et al., 2013). Relative to low identifiers, high identifiers may recall their partner's transgressions as less severe, less common, or less consequential days later. High identifiers may also do things that contribute to healing the damage caused by a partner's transgression. In the present study, I did examine accommodation (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) and relationship attributions as potential mediators (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) but none of these could explain the buffering effect of relationship identification on global relationship satisfaction. Additional analyses revealed that, relative to low identifiers, high identifiers tended to react more constructively to their partner's transgressions by voicing their concerns: They actively and constructively tried to improve conditions by discussing the situation with their partner, suggesting changes to solve the problem. Moreover, partners of high identifiers reported more positive behaviors the day following a transgression. However, this did not statistically account for the interactive effect between accumulation of partner transgression and relationship identification on change in global relationship satisfaction two weeks later. These findings provide some clues as to the reasons why high identifiers maintain their satisfaction in spite of recent negative relationship experiences, but additional research is needed to better understand this issue.

These findings also speak to a debate in the field about whether it is better to see one's relationship accurately or with a positively biased view. Holmes' macromotives (1981) suggests that when evaluating their relationship, individuals may rely on their beliefs about the relationship rather than partners' microbehaviors, which contribute to maintaining a stable bond. Conversely, McNulty et al. (2008) argue that being sensitive to negative relationship experiences may protect relationships over time as it sends the signal that work has to be done and motivates people to engage in efforts at repairing the relationship. The current findings suggest that both of these processes may be involved. When the relationship is self-defining, individuals may be motivated to maintain a general positive view of the relationship over time, but they may also engage in relationship repair behaviors when negative relationship events happen, as they are especially hurt. The difference between eyes wide open versus rose coloured may not be as great as it appears because macromotives such as identification are likely to motivate a range of pro-relationship behaviors that help sustain the relationship. However, is it that the negative event is the trigger for pro-relationship behavior, or that the overall rate of pro-relationship behavior will be higher because of the macromotives? Further work is required to establish how this happens and the relative impact of different pro-relationship processes.

In addition, given the research was non-experimental, causal inference cannot be drawn. However, because relationship identification was assessed prior to the experience sampling study and outcomes were assessed within person, it increases my confidence that identification predicts greater within-person reactivity to immediate relationship events and greater global relationship resilience in terms of global relationship evaluations, and not the reverse.

Conclusion

Even the healthiest couples inevitably face negative relationship experiences. Motivation may moderate responses in the moment and over time. The immediate sting of a partner's bad behavior is greater when the relationship is a core part of one's sense of self, but the same relational aspect of self that elicits strong reactivity also predicts subsequent relationship resilience. Seeing a close relationship as self-defining may temporarily come at a cost, but it seems to sustain satisfying relationships over time.

Footnotes

[1]The primary findings for the daily and the two-week analysis remained mostly unchanged when I controlled for partner's positive behavior (all *ps* < .05). No interaction effects were found between positive events and identification.

[2] Relationship identification was measured at Time 1 and 2, which allowed me to examine within-person changes in identification. It did not increase or decrease in two weeks for neither men nor women. The high correlation between Time 1 and Time 2 ($r = .73$, $p < .001$ for men, and $r = .78$, $p < .001$ for women) indicates high consistency in one's relative position across time.

[3]For daily relationship well-being, there was no main effect or interactions involving gender but women reported slightly more negative affect than men. Partner's identification was associated with less daily negative affect among men not women. Moreover, the association between partner transgressions and negative affect was slightly stronger for women than men.

[4]To ensure that the interaction was not due to a floor effect because daily relationship well-being of low identifiers could not drop more on transgression days, I inspected the unstandardized means and they were all above midpoint ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 0.92$; for scales on a 5-point Likert scale, and $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.34$; for scales on a 7-point Likert scale).

[5]I explored whether relationship identification was associated with biases in judgments of partner transgressions. Highly identified women reported slightly fewer partner transgressions (see Table 1). However, there was no effect of identification when controlling for Time 1 satisfaction. Also, I explored severity ratings. No significant associations emerged. Thus, identification did not seem to strongly bias participants' reports of partner transgression.

[6]I looked at combined positive affect and negative affect. The results hold for the daily and the two-week analysis (all *ps* < .05).

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) and Correlations for Study 6

		Correlations											
Variables	*M* (*SD*)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Identified motives T1	5.38 (.92)	-	.56**	.50**	.37**	.34**	-.06	-.23	.29*	.16	.30**	.26*	.24
2. Intrinsic motives T1	6.37 (.60)	.61**	-	.31*	.56**	.49**	-.10	-.42**	.43**	.39**	.26*	.43**	.39**
3. Commitment T1	8.03 (.86)	.76**	.70**	-	.42**	.59**	-.22	-.25*	.34**	.27*	.25	.40**	.27*
4. Satisfaction T1	7.70 (.97)	.58**	.65**	.57**	-	.45**	-.34**	-.54**	.45**	.45**	.27*	.48**	.45**
5. Satisfaction T2	7.51 (1.17)	.47**	.47**	.48**	.54**	-	-.33**	-.28*	.45**	.42**	.30*	.48**	.42**
6. Partner transgressions	3.02 (2.44)	-.33**	-.28*	-.40**	-.52**	-.26*	-	.40**	-.38**	-.47**	-.23	-.47**	-.22
7. Negative affect	1.99 (.48)	-.18	-.28*	-.23	-.25*	-.21	.25*	-	-.58**	-.63**	-.43**	-.58**	-.43**
8. Relationship well-being	.00 (.55)	.41**	.45**	.52**	.46**	.59**	-.41**	-.44**	-	.90**	.81**	.89**	.89**
9. Intimacy	3.86 (.52)	.33*	.35**	.38**	.44**	.48**	-.39**	-.50**	.91**	-	.52**	.88**	.75**
10. IOS	4.56 (1.15)	.49**	.41**	.53**	.38**	.56**	-.35**	-.33**	.86**	.66**	-	.54**	.66**
11. Closeness	3.87 (.61)	.43**	.44**	.53**	.45**	.51**	-.44**	-.39**	.91**	.85**	.67**	-	.77**
12. Happiness	4.95 (.76)	.17	.39**	.38**	.37**	.51**	-.30*	-.37**	.88**	.76**	.64**	.73**	-

Note. Correlations for men (n = 63) are displayed above the diagonal and correlations for women (n = 63) are displayed below the diagonal. Daily measures (i.e., negative affect, relationship well-being, intimacy, IOS, closeness, happiness) were averaged across the 2-week period. T1 = first lab session; T2 = second lab session; Partner transgressions = the total number of transgressions reported across the 2-week period; IOS = Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Results from Multilevel Models with Actor and Partner Level of Transgression and Relationship Identification Predicting Actor's Daily Relationship Well-being and Actor's Daily Negative affect.

	Daily Relationship Well-Being			Daily Negative Affect		
Predictor variable	*b (SE)*	95% CI	*r*	*b (SE)*	95% CI	*r*
Intercept	-.00 (.06)	[-.12, .11]	.00	1.98**(.04)	[1.89, 2.07]	.98
Partner transgressions						
Actor effect	-.45** (.07)	[-.59, -.31]	.65	.36**(.07)	[.23, .50]	.58
Partner effect	-.22** (.05)	[-.32, -.12]	.55	.24**(.05)	[.14, .35]	.58
Identification (ID)						
Actor effect	.19** (.04)	[.11, .28]	.44	-.08* (.04)	[-.16, -.01]	.19
Partner effect	.09* (.04)	[.01, .17]	.22	-.06 (.04)	[-.14, .01]	.14
Partner transgressions X ID						
Actor effect	-.20** (.06)	[-.31, -.09]	.18	.17**(.06)	[.06, .28]	.17
Partner effect	-.11* (.05)	[-.20, -.01]	.17	.04 (.05)	[-.05, .14]	.07
Time	-.00 (.01)	[-.01, .01]	.00	-.01*(.01)	[-.03, -.00]	.12

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (*b*) are reported. Partner transgressions were centered around the participant's mean. Relationship identification was centered around the sample mean. Effect-sizes *r* were estimated with the *t* to *r* formula ($t/\sqrt{df+t^2}$), following Kenny et al.'s (2006) recommendations.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Change in Global Relationship Satisfaction Over Time as a Function of Relationship Identification and Partner Transgression Frequency (Model 1); and as a Function of Relationship Identification and the Degree of Negative Affect in Response to Daily Transgressions (Model 2).

	Global Relationship Satisfaction T2		
	b (SE)	95% CI	Effect-size *r*
Model 1			
Relationship satisfaction T1	.45** (.12)	[.22, .68]	.33
Identification (ID)	.23* (.11)	[.02, .44]	.19
Partner transgression frequency	-.05 (.04)	[-.13, .03]	.11
ID x partner transgression frequency	.09* (.04)	[.00, .17]	.19
Model 2			
Relationship satisfaction T1	.46** (.10)	[.25, .66]	.38
Identification (ID)	.32** (.11)	[.11, .53]	.26
Daily emotional reactivity	-.35 (.26)	[-.86, .16]	.12
ID x daily emotional reactivity	.72** (.25)	[.22, 1.22]	.27

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (b) are reported. T1 = first lab session; T2 = second lab session.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

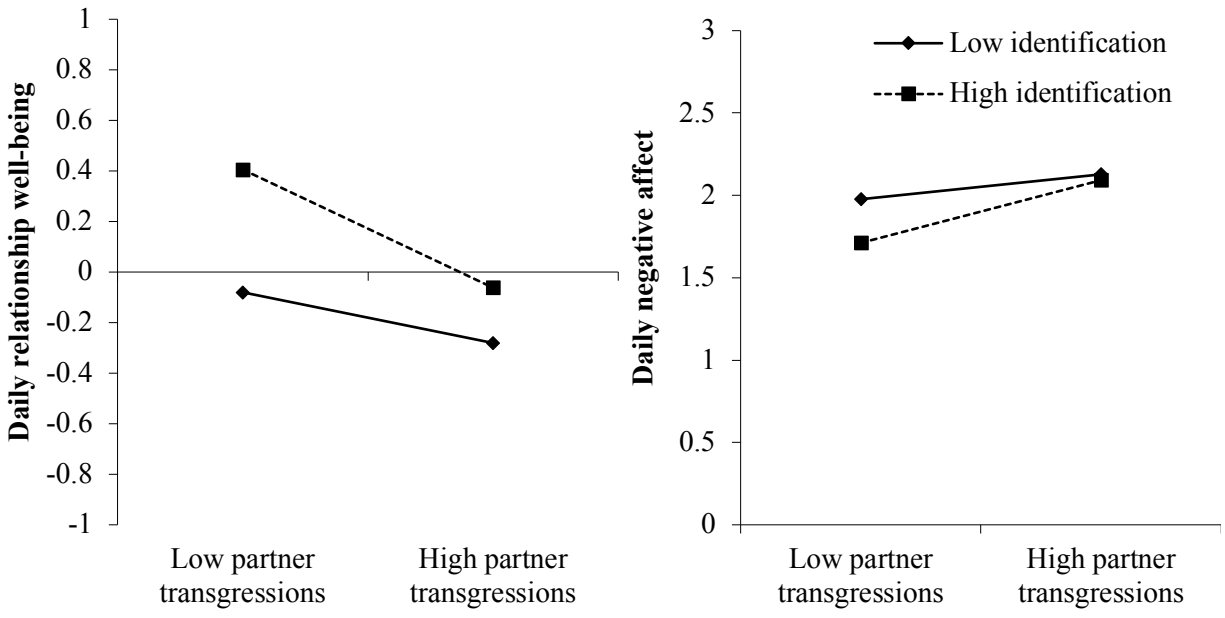

Figure 6. The within-person associations between partner transgressions and daily appraisals as a function of relationship identification (Study 6)

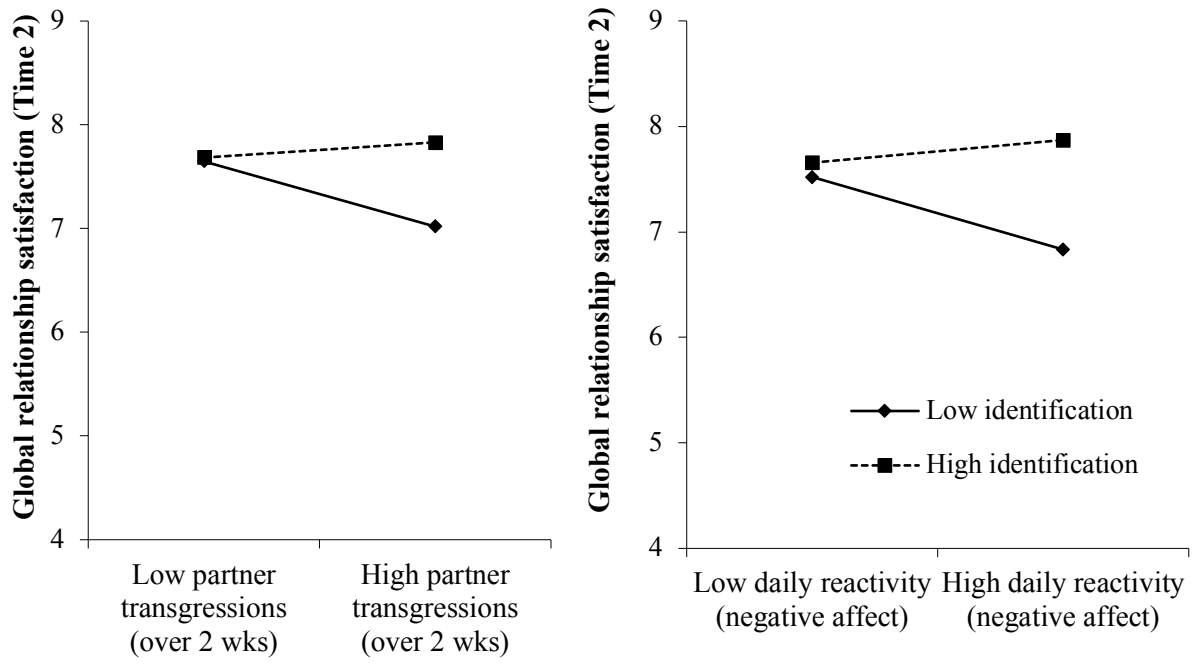

Figure 7. Change in global relationship satisfaction as a function of relationship identification and the accumulation of partner transgressions (Model 1) and as a function of relationship identification and the degree of negative affect in response to daily transgressions (Model 2)

Chapter 5

General Discussion

Much research in the interpersonal relationships literature has focused on how to help couples maintain or even increase current levels of satisfaction (e.g., Birnbaum, 2007; Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Halford, 2004; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Patrick et al., 2007; Sanderson, 2004). Although satisfaction signals whether the relationship is rewarding and is thus a key feature of successful relationships, it may not always provide individuals with the motivation necessary to weather through difficult times (e.g., Lydon & Linardatos, 2011). Indeed, past research has shown that it is only a moderate predictor of whether a relationship will survive (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). If satisfaction was the only force operating in relationships, many individuals would leave relationships during challenging and unsatisfying times, which will inevitably occur over the course of a relationship. During these times, other motivational forces may be a more powerful predictor of how individuals will behave. After all, individuals will often sacrifice immediate happiness and satisfaction in pursuit of larger and more meaningful goals (Mischel, 1974; Mischel, Shoda, Rodriguez, 1989).

One way to capture how motivated individuals will be to protect their relationship during difficult times may be the extent to which individuals see the relationship as a valued part of their self-concept (i.e., relationship identification). Indeed, individuals engage in a myriad of strategies to protect the self when important aspects of the self are threatened (Gollwitzer et al., 1982; Steele, 1988); if the relationship is also part of the self, individuals may engage in various protective strategies when their relationship is threatened. Thus, by tying the relationship and the self closely together, relationship regulation becomes self-regulation (Linardatos & Lydon, 2011).

Consistent with this possibility, past research has shown that relationship identification predicts whether individuals engage in spontaneous relationship protective cognitions and behaviors when faced with a relationship threat (Auger et al., 2016; Linardatos & Lydon, 2011): Highly identified individuals automatically divert their attention away from attractive alternative partners, they let attractive others know that they are in a relationship, and they bolster their conviction in the relationship after discovering that they and their partner have different values about an important life decision. Moreover, as the relationship is centrally important to the self, this prominent identity may exert powerful influences on one's daily life (e.g., Burke & Stets, 2009).

What Fosters Relationship Identification?

Given these beneficial relationship outcomes, it is important to understand what fosters relationship identification. The present research provides insights into how relationships become part of one's self-concept. I provide compelling evidence that understanding is a key factor in changing individuals' relationship identification in various close relationships (i.e., romantic relationships and friendships): Individuals who felt more understood consequently identified with their relationship more, and those who felt less understood identified with their relationship less. Although a long tradition of research has demonstrated the importance of intimacy in interpersonal relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988), past research has examined how all three aspects of intimacy (i.e., caring, acceptance, and understanding) contribute to relationship outcomes together (e.g., Laurenceau et al., 2005). The present research decomposed these components and examined unique contributions in predicting relationship outcomes: Understanding, but not caring or acceptance, uniquely predicted relationship identification (Studies 1 and 2). In contrast, I found that relationship satisfaction was not uniquely predicted by understanding; instead, satisfaction was predicted by the presence of multiple components of

intimacy (Study 1: caring and understanding; Study 2: all three components together). Thus, the present findings suggest that there may be something distinct about understanding, apart from feeling cared for and accepted, that is especially likely to elicit relationship identification.

These studies also provide evidence of the causal link between understanding and relationship identification in both romantic relationships and friendships. In Studies 3–5, I experimentally manipulated felt understanding using two different methods. Using the ease of retrieval paradigm, Study 3 revealed that romantically-involved participants assigned to recall 9 instances of partner understanding perceived the task to be more difficult, which led them to feel less understood and less identified with their relationship. Study 4 extended these results to friendships: Participants reported being more identified with their friendship when it was easy (vs. difficult) to recall instances in which their friend understood them. Study 5 replicated this finding using a visualization task. Across these three studies, I show that individuals came to perceive their romantic relationship or their friendship as more central to their identity when they felt understood relative to when the felt less understood. In sum, these five studies, using diverse methods (i.e., experimental, survey, and longitudinal), provide converging evidence that understanding fosters identification with a specific relationship.

Finally, I demonstrate the downstream consequences of identifying with a relationship. To date, past research examining relationship identification has focused on the extent to which individuals engage in relationship maintenance behaviors when faced with various threats induced in the lab but not whether their day-to-day experiences differ. In Chapter 4, I provide compelling evidence that identification shapes how individuals experience their relationships, in particular negative events, in daily life. Indeed, experiences in relationships may be amplified when one identifies with the relationship because relationship outcomes have implications for the self.

Consistent with this idea, I found that individuals who identify with their relationship experienced more negative affect and a steeper decline in relationship satisfaction after partner transgressions than those who do not. However, instead of disengaging from the relationship due to these negative experiences, these individuals maintained their overall conviction that their current romantic relationship was satisfying and worthwhile. In contrast, recent negative relationship experiences appeared to challenge the overall conviction of less identified individuals. Importantly, the relationship between negative relationship experiences and relationship evaluations remained significant when controlling for one's intrinsic motivation to maintain the relationship or one's general motivation to maintain the relationship (i.e., relationship commitment). Because high identifiers care a great deal about their relationship, they feel especially badly and not as good about the relationship when their partner enacts a negative behavior towards them. However, this self-relevance of and care for the relationship also appears to motivate them to remain resilient in their global judgments of relationship satisfaction (i.e., maintain satisfaction) over time.

Taken together, these findings are the first to demonstrate that understanding fosters relationship identification. Moreover, seeing a relationship as a valued part of the self appears to have both positive and negative consequences in daily life. These findings represent an original contribution to research in the interpersonal relationships literature and have both theoretical and practical implications. In the next section, I will discuss these implications and provide suggestions for future investigation.

Theoretical Implications and Future Directions

Although relationships are a fundamental aspect of the self-concept (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Baldwin, 1992; Chen et al., 2006), little attention has been devoted to understanding what

contributes to the development of a strong relational identity. In examining one potential factor leading to relationship identification, the present program of research is taking a step towards uncovering how a specific relationship becomes tied to the self. Specifically, it demonstrates an empirical link between relationship identification and an important relationship experience, feeling understood by one's partner and friend. Thus, this research provides key evidence indicating that relationship experiences shape relationship identification.

Moreover, I show that the construct of relationship identification extends to other types of relationship. Single individuals can identify with a specific friendship, such that this friendship becomes an important part of the self. Furthermore, identification in friendships appears to follow a similar process of development as identification in romantic relationships: Individuals who feel more understood by their friend, identify with this specific relationship more.

Implications for intimacy. These findings extend the long tradition of research demonstrating the importance of intimacy in interpersonal relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Although many studies have examined the importance of feeling understood, cared for, and accepted by one's romantic partner (e.g., Gable, Gosnell, Maisel, & Strachman, 2012; Laurenceau et al., 1998; 2005; Reis, Maniaci, & Rogge, 2014), much of this research has assumed that each component of intimacy performs the same function. Together, they all promote the same positive relationship outcomes, such as relationship satisfaction. However, the present findings demonstrate that understanding, but not caring or acceptance, uniquely predicts relationship identification. Consequently, it is possible that understanding, caring, and acceptance each perform unique functions in close relationships and may thus promote different relationship processes while working together to increase other positive relationship outcomes.

Furthermore, past research examining intimacy has often assumed that all the components of intimacy co-occur. That is, a relationship that is high in understanding will also be high in caring and acceptance. Although this may be true of some relationships, especially those that are healthy, the present studies demonstrate that these three elements do not need to co-occur. Indeed, Study 1 demonstrates that participants in the high caring condition perceived relatively high levels of caring but low levels of understanding. Thus, it is possible that lay people do not always group these three components together. Instead, they may recognize that some of their relationships are higher in one of the components but lower in the others. For example, Mike may notice when Jane is tired and cook dinner for her. Because Mike often shows concern for Jane's welfare, she may feel especially cared for by Mike. However, Mike may not fully understand the reasons why Jane is tired. Jane may even decide not to talk about her concerns knowing that Mike will not "get" it. Thus, Jane may feel cared for by Mike even if he does not understand important aspects of herself. Alternatively, Nancy may really feel understood by Bob, but she may not feel appreciated or cared for. For example, Bob may recognize when Nancy is extremely anxious about impending deadlines at work. However, in these situations, Bob often tells her that she is weak for letting her anxiety consume her, and that she keeps reacting this way during difficult times, something that Nancy is completely aware of. Tired of having to deal with Nancy's anxiety, Bob often decides to spend time with his friends instead of helping her. Nancy may feel understood by Bob because he knows how she typically behaves in a given situation, but she may not necessarily feel appreciated or valued. If we average across components, Jane and Nancy may appear to have similar levels of intimacy overall even though their experience in their relationships is likely to be highly different. To the extent that different relationships are characterized by different combinations of these

elements of intimacy, decoupling these elements will provide researchers with greater insight into more diverse relationship experiences.

Understanding in close relationships. These studies demonstrate that perceived understanding fosters greater identification. Perceived understanding is a subjective feeling of how well one's partner knows you (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2009; 2011). Reis and Shaver (1988) theorize that individuals feel understood when they disclose important aspects of their self to their partner and feel that their partner "gets" them (see also Gable & Reis, 2006). Taken together, this suggests that individuals who feel understood assume that their partner has access to deep and core aspects of themselves.

It is possible that having a partner who actually knows aspects about the self (i.e., has accurate knowledge of the self) fosters greater relationship identification. Indeed, one could assume that having a partner who accurately knows you would also make you feel more understood. However, it is not simply a matter of having knowledge about the self, but rather it is having knowledge of core and deep aspects about the self, such as one's deepest goals and needs, hopes and wishes, fears and dreams. After all, superficial knowledge of the self (e.g., one's favourite colour) are also facts about the self but do not signal that one has access to knowledge about core and deep aspects about the self. One way to examine whether a partner has access to this privileged information would be to examine whether one's partner knows how one is unique and distinct from others (e.g., high in distinctive accuracy; Human & Biesanz, 2011; Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, & Dunn, 2013; Lorenzo, Biesanz, & Human, 2010).

In addition to knowing more broad aspects of the self, partners may also gain contextualized knowledge about the self. That is, the partner knows the conditions in which individuals behave or react in a certain way (i.e., if-then contingencies). For example, Mike knows

that whenever his partner Jane feels like she is falling short, she becomes agitated and distant. In this context, he may be able to accurately reflect her experience and put labels on emotions that even she may be unaware of. Thus, knowing one's if-then contingencies indicates that someone has intimate and unique knowledge of the self. In a way, this person not only has the ability to detect one's individuality, but also has the ability to reveal it. Whenever individuals realize that their partner knows such intimate and core aspects of themselves, they may become more aware of how well this person knows them.

Taken together, having accurate knowledge about these unique yet core aspects about the self may promote greater perceived understanding. Accurate knowledge alone may not be enough; indeed, past research has found that accuracy is not always related to perceived understanding (e.g., Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Instead, the content of the knowledge may determine whether individuals feel understood. Moving forward, it will be important to examine whether accuracy about key aspects of the self, such as one's if-then contingencies, leads to greater relationship identification and if perceived understanding is the mechanism for this pathway.

Potential Mechanisms

The present research focused on demonstrating the causal link between perceived understanding and relationship identification. However, it is unclear *how* perceived understanding promotes relationship identification. One potential mechanism is that perceived understanding simultaneously fulfills the need for inclusion and the need to be distinct: Understanding allows individuals to feel like themselves but that they are not alone. Indeed, Brewer (1991) suggests that there is a tension between individuals' motives to differentiate themselves from others (i.e., to be distinct) and to be included (i.e., to belong). Moreover, optimal distinctiveness theory suggests that individuals tend to identify with groups that balance both of these needs. It is possible that

understanding is one way in which close others may help individuals meet *both* of these needs: A close other recognizes what is distinct and unique about an individual, and chooses to maintain their relationship. Thus, relationships high in perceived understanding may cause greater relationship identification by fulfilling these two needs concurrently.

Another potential mechanism through which understanding may increase identification is through fostering greater meaning in life. When individuals feel that their lives are meaningful, they feel that their lives are *comprehensible* and *worth living*, and that they have a *purpose* (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016; Park, 2010). An interpersonal relationship that provides understanding may increase meaning in life because it has the potential to increase all these components of meaning. For example, a critical function of interpersonal relationships is to provide individuals with opportunities to understand who they are (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burke & Stets, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Swann et al., 2003). Indeed, humans, even at a very young age, turn to others to understand and validate their thoughts and feelings about themselves (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). In doing so, individuals may sense that "who I am" is accurately reflected by someone else (Swann et al., 2003). Similarly, if individuals discover that they experience the world the same way as someone else (shared reality; Hardin & Higgins, 1996), they may feel that their worldviews are less subjective and more "tuned into social reality" (Stinson et al., 2010, p. 995). Thus, feeling understood provides some evidence that one's views about oneself or the world reflect reality and thus *makes sense* because others have similar views. This in turn may also allow individuals to predict and control their environment, providing them with a sense of agency and *purpose* (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014). Furthermore, when individuals feel deeply understood by someone, they may feel as though their existence matters and has *significance* because someone has invested the effort

into developing in-depth knowledge about who they are. Consequently, interpersonal relationships that provide understanding may increase meaning in life in various ways. Importantly, aspects of one's life that make life more meaningful may be more likely to be valued, and thus to become central to one's identity (see Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). Indeed, goals or roles that are particularly valued are more likely to be considered as part of the self than those that are not (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Consequently, a relationship that fulfills a person's need for meaning may be more valued and perceived as an important aspect of one's identity.

Practical Implications

Identification and positive relationship processes. Although relationship identification is relatively stable, the present findings demonstrate that single instances of understanding or misunderstanding can be enough to change relationship identification. Thus, it may be especially beneficial for individuals to try to understand their partner during difficult times in order to build stronger relationships. In interpersonal experiences whether positive or negative, there is an opportunity to understand one's partner. Indeed, Reis and Shaver (1988) have argued that disclosures of discomfort or anger can also result in greater intimacy if handled sensitively. Consistent with this possibility, recent research has shown that perceived understanding buffers against the negative impact of conflicts: Highly understood individuals remained satisfied with their relationship despite conflict in their relationships (Gordon & Chen, 2016). An additional benefit that individuals high in perceived understanding may reap during relationship conflicts is greater relationship identification, an issue that deserves further research.

Understanding may also be especially important when partners undergo life transitions, such as changing careers or becoming a parent, which are particularly challenging and stressful for relationships. During these times, partners may change to adapt to their new roles. If

individuals do not understand these new aspects of their partner, they may grow apart from their partner, resulting in a greater likelihood of relationship dissolution. However, by understanding how the partner has changed, couples may successfully navigate these life transitions or difficult times by building stronger ties between the self and the relationship.

The current findings also raise the possibility that understanding motivates pro-relationship behaviors and cognitions. Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, and Keijsers (2011) have shown that individuals who feel understood, cared for, and accepted by their partner are especially *grateful* for their partner, and this in turn promotes daily relationship maintenance behaviors. For example, individuals were more likely to do things that were not their responsibility. In addition to increasing feelings of gratitude, the understanding built with a romantic partner over the course of a relationship may also be considered an investment that would be lost if the relationship were to end. Individuals who feel deeply understood by their partner may believe that no one else will understand them as well as their current partner (or they may think that it would take a long time to obtain a similar level of understanding). Consequently, even highly attractive alternative partners may not represent a viable alternative when reminded of how understood they feel by their partner. Understanding may thus be an important determinant of relationship maintenance.

Fostering identification among insecure individuals. Although understanding is important, not everyone seeks intimacy to the same degree. Indeed, past research has shown that individuals vary in the extent to which they pursue intimacy goals (Sanderson & Cantor, 1997; Sanderson & Evans, 2001). Moreover, individuals differ in their expectations about intimacy (e.g., Prager & Roberts, 2004); some individuals may not expect their partner to understand them. For example, individuals who are chronically uncomfortable with closeness and see others as unreliable (i.e., avoidantly attached individuals) may not expect their partner to understand them

(e.g., Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2012). They also tend to self-disclose less (Anders & Tucker, 2005; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005), which may make it more difficult for their partner to understand them. Given the importance of understanding in fostering relationship identification, it is possible that these individuals are less likely to identify with their relationship and thus less likely to engage in behaviors to protect and maintain their relationship, which may ultimately contribute to avoidantly attached individuals' negative relationship outcomes.

However, it is possible that positive interactions and relationship experiences could lead avoidantly attached individuals to let their guard down and to seek understanding. Indeed, MacDonald and Borsook (2010) demonstrated that avoidant individuals felt closer to a confederate when this person provided *warm validation* (e.g., by leaning towards the participant) than when this person was relatively *cold* (e.g., by avoiding eye contact). Thus, it is possible that positive relationship experiences, such as feeling accepted, allow avoidantly attached individuals to feel secure enough to self-disclose to their partner and to be known. That is, for avoidant individuals, feeling cared for and accepted may precede feeling understood. In contrast, previous research has assumed that understanding is a precursor to acceptance (e.g., I can only feel accepted and cared for when you see the real me; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Indeed, it may be especially important for insecure individuals to feel accepted and valued by their partner in order to feel understood, and this in turn may lead them to identify with their relationship. It will be important in the future to expand the current model to include individual differences variables, such as relationship insecurities, that might influence the development of relationship identification.

The dark side of identification. Although understanding and relationship identification have many positive consequences, it is also important to consider whether understanding and relationship identification can bind people to bad relationships. The current work suggests that when individuals feel understood by a romantic partner, they may identify with this relationship, despite a potential lack of support and care from the partner. Thus, examining the role of understanding, above and beyond the other aspects of intimacy or responsiveness, may shed some light on why some individuals stay in harmful relationships. Individuals may identify with a harmful relationship if it allows them to make sense of themselves and the world, and this, in turn, may sustain their motivation to persist in the relationship. Indeed, when the costs of giving up an identity are high, individuals are especially likely to hold on to that identity (Stryker, 1968). Consequently, a partner who has a deep understanding of who one is may have a powerful hold over an individual. Indeed, individuals may continue to identify with a harmful relationship (or even a past relationship) because it is a valuable source of understanding: Leaving the relationship would threaten their understanding of themselves and the world.

Additionally, the current research raises the question of whether high identifiers may be more likely to protect a harmful relationship. Indeed, I provide evidence that highly identified individuals hold positive overall views of their relationship despite recent negative events. That is, individuals who are successful at maintaining their relationship appear to use cognitive strategies to limit the influence of their partner's negative behaviours and traits from colouring their overall judgment of their partner and the relationship. This is consistent with past research showing that when presented with their partner's flaws, individuals will try to reframe these as positive traits (i.e., turn faults into virtues, Murray & Holmes, 1993) or describe them in very specific and concrete terms (Neff & Karney, 2005). Similarly, when dealing with a partner transgression, high

identifiers may recognize that this is just one incident in the grand scheme of things. That is, they may adopt a broad perspective on their relationship and look towards the positive long-term outcomes.

Although these strategies help to maintain relationships (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Neff & Karney, 2005; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995), whether these strategies are healthy actually depends on the nature of the relationship itself (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). This process may be harmful for individuals in unhealthy relationships, such as abusive ones. In these relationships, it may be more adaptive for the individuals to use recent negative experiences to update their global evaluations of the relationship rather than maintaining an overall rosy view of the relationship.

Conclusion

Although researchers have examined relationship maintenance processes and intimacy for several decades, there has been little research investigating how intimacy, or its components, contribute to relationship maintenance processes. The present research is the first to empirically demonstrate how one component of intimacy*, understanding*, fosters an important form of relationship motivation, *relationship identification*. Specifically, the current findings provide evidence that understanding increases relationship identification independently of other central features of intimacy, such as feeling cared for and accepted. Moreover, the present research provides further advances regarding the motivational underpinnings of relationship maintenance. Specifically, the present findings show that relationship identification in particular may play an important role in the way people think about their romantic relationships when confronted with conflicts in daily life. Thus, this research contributes not only to the literature on relationship maintenance but also contributes to our knowledge of the factors that lead some relationships to

become a core part of the self. Indeed, feeling understood is a powerful force that can bind individuals to their relationships.

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Appendix A (Study 1)

Vignettes created for the person-perception study.

High caring relationship:

Mike and I have been in a dating relationship for the past three months. We are both young professionals living in the United States. I feel that Mike is very supportive and caring of me. He comforts me when I need it; he is just always there for me. I can say that he cares for me. But at times, I feel that he doesn't know me. Mike doesn't get my deepest private goals, hopes and fears. He just doesn't get me at times. I can completely count on him to support me but he is a bit clueless and out of touch about some of the things that makes me "me".

High understanding relationship:

Mike and I have been in a dating relationship for the past three months. We are both young professionals living in the United States. I feel that no one knows me better than him. I feel that Mike has an intuitive understanding of who I am. He knows my deepest private goals, hopes, and fears better than anyone else does. I can say that he gets me. But at times, Mike can be a bit critical, questioning of me. He's not the most conscientious person in the world so his support and caring is not totally reliable. I can completely count on him to understand me and my deepest concerns but there is not always follow through with support and caring.

Appendix B (Study 3)

Findings of Study 3 revealed an indirect effect of ease of retrieval condition (ease = 0; difficulty = 1) on relationship identification through perceived difficulty. However, it is possible that perceived difficulty and relationship identification was only associated for those who were relatively low in baseline understanding. Indeed, individuals who deeply feel understood by their partner may be less likely to use the ease with which examples of partner understanding come to mind to make their judgments about relationship identification.

Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine whether the relationship between perceived difficulty and relationship identification was moderated by baseline levels of perceived partner understanding. Specifically, I examined whether the indirect effect of condition on relationship identification through perceived difficulty varied as a function of perceived understanding at Phase 1. To test this, I conducted a moderated mediation using PROCESS (Model 14 with 5000 resamples; Hayes 2013). This analysis controlled for relationship identification and perceived understanding at baselines. Condition was coded 0 for the ease condition and 1 for difficult condition.

Results revealed a significant indirect effect of condition on identification for individuals who reported relatively low levels of understanding at baseline (-1SD; indirect effect = -.14, 95% CI [-.24, -.05]), and for individuals who reported mean level of understanding at baseline, (indirect effect = -.06, 95%CI [-13, -.001]). However, no significant indirect effect of perceived difficulty emerged on relationship identification for individuals who were high in understanding at baseline (CI contained zero). The index for the moderated mediation was also significant, index = .05, SE =.02, 95CI [.02, .10]. The model is depicted in the Figure below.

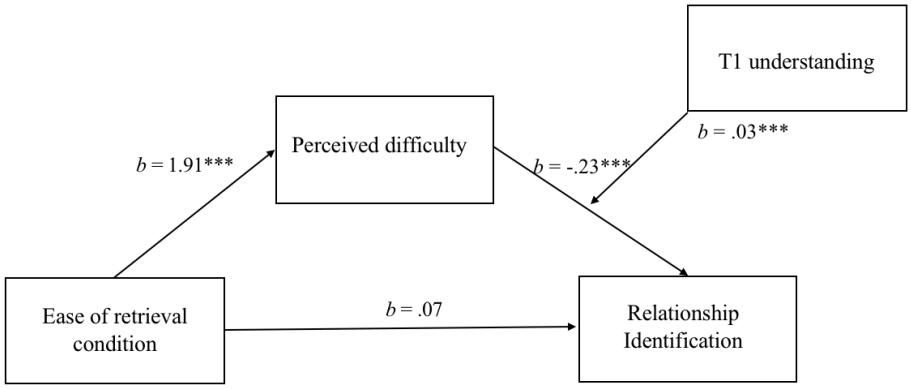

Figure. Conditional mediation model for Study 3. Unstandardized coefficients are reported.

*** $p < .001$.

Appendix C (Study 4)

Findings of Study 4 revealed a main effect of condition (ease = 0; difficulty = 1) on relationship identification: Participants reported being more identified with their friendship after recalling three instances in which they felt understood by their friend than after recalling nine instances. One could wonder whether perceived understanding mediates this effect. To test this I conducted a mediation analysis and examine whether condition indirectly affected relationship identification through *perceived understanding*, controlling for baseline relationship identification and baseline understanding (PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 resamples; Hayes, 2013). The indirect effect of condition (ease = 0; difficulty = 1) on relationship identification through perceived understanding was not significantly different from zero (indirect effect = -0.05, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.20, 0.02]). However, the direct effect of condition on relationship identification remained significant, b = -0.41, [-0.73, -0.08] *SE* = 0.16, $t(73)=2.49$, p =.015.

Appendix D (Study 5)

Findings of Study 5 revealed a main effect of condition on relationship identification: Participants reported being more identified with their friendship after imagining being understood by their friend than after imagining not being understood. A mediation analysis controlling for baseline relationship identification and baseline understanding was conducted to examine whether the visualization task indirectly affected relationship identification through *perceived understanding* (PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 resamples; Hayes, 2013). The indirect effect of condition (low understanding = 0; high understanding = 1) on relationship identification through perceived understanding was significantly different from zero (indirect effect = 0.19, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.09, 0.33]). Results are depicted in the figure below.

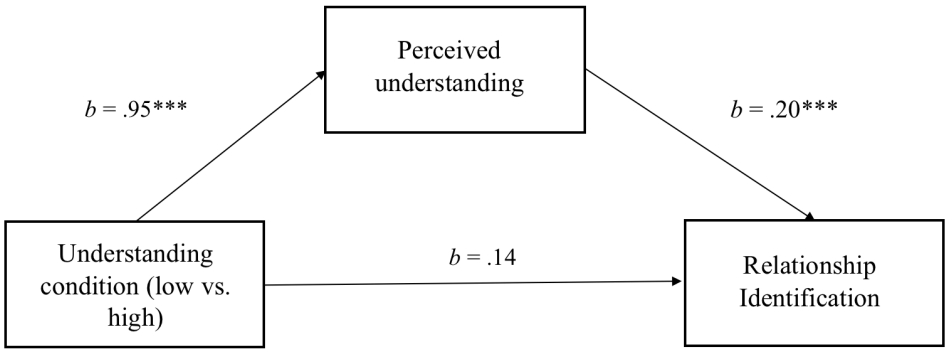

Figure. Mediation model for Study 5. This analysis controls for relationship identification at Phase 1 and perceived understanding at Phase 1. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported.

*** $p < .001$.