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When You Accept Me for Me: The Relational Benefits of Intrinsic Affirmations From One's Relationship Partner

Amie M. Gordon[1] and Serena Chen[1]

Abstract

Research suggests that not all affirmations of self-worth are created equal—affirming intrinsic aspects of the self (i.e., a person's stable, intrinsic qualities) leads to better outcomes for the individual compared to affirming extrinsic aspects (i.e., a person's deeds and accomplishments). Extending this research to the domain of romantic relationships, the current research compared the relational benefits of recalling intrinsic versus extrinsic affirmations from a romantic partner among people high versus low in baseline relationship satisfaction. Across three experiments, as predicted, people low but not high in baseline satisfaction reported higher relationship quality and more pro-relationship responses after recalling a time of intrinsic compared to extrinsic affirmation from a romantic partner. Together, these experiments suggest that affirmations from relationship partners may be important for enhancing relationships, but only if they emphasize intrinsic qualities of the self.

Individuals in romantic relationships are constantly balancing their desire for closeness against their need to protect themselves from rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). When something negative happens in a relationship, such as a betrayal by one's partner, it is easy to protect the self and respond in kind. However, when individuals respond constructively instead, both partners benefit (e.g., Murray, Holmes et al., 2006; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Such responses enhance the relationship (e.g., Gottman, 1979; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986) and promote positive upward cycles.

People in satisfying relationships tend to exhibit pro-relationship responses to negative partner behaviors. For example, they excuse their partners' transgressions (Rusbult et al., 1991), make positive attributions about their partners' negative behaviors (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000), and communicate constructively with their partners (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). By contrast, people in dissatisfying relationships may actually create downward spirals by responding with equal or greater negativity to negative partner behaviors (Rusbult et al., 1991). The present research focused on these latter individuals, testing whether recalling affirmations from relationship partners that refer to one's intrinsic qualities, compared to affirmations of extrinsic aspects

of the self, would lead less satisfied individuals to report higher relationship quality and respond more constructively to negative partner behaviors.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Self-Worth: Affirming Who One Is Versus What One Does

Individuals can derive their self-worth from stable sources, such as their intrinsic attributes, or from less stable sources, such as external standards. Affirmations based on these different sources have different consequences. Feeling affirmed for living up to external standards results in constant vigilance and defensiveness, whereas having intrinsic qualities affirmed decreases psychological defensiveness (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). More concretely, research shows that compared to when they receive social validation for extrinsic deeds and accomplishments, when people receive social validation for their intrinsic qualities,

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they make fewer downward social comparisons and counter-factuals, engage in less social distancing and self-handicapping, conform less, are less concerned with social rejection, and make fewer external attributions about their abilities (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004; Schimel et al., 2001).

Relationship partners can be an important source of intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations. For example, Courtney may feel intrinsically affirmed by her boyfriend when he praises her for being a supportive person, or extrinsically affirmed when he praises her for having aced an important exam. Do intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations from relationship partners lead to similar or different relational outcomes?

The Relational Benefits of Intrinsic Affirmations

Both of the preceding affirmations would seem to reflect positive, relationship-enhancing experiences. However, drawing on existing work (Arndt et al., 2002; Schimel et al., 2001; Schimel et al., 2004), we propose that affirmations that focus on one's intrinsic qualities—such as praise for being a supportive person—not only reduce defensiveness but also help people feel unconditionally accepted and understood by their relationship partners. In contrast, extrinsic affirmations—such as praise for acing a big exam—do not reduce defensiveness and may in fact suggest contingent acceptance from, as well as a lack of being understood by, one's partner.

The reduced defensiveness that results from intrinsic affirmations should have relational benefits. When individuals are less concerned about protecting themselves against rejection, they are more trusting, committed, and satisfied with their relationships (e.g., Murray et al., 2005; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Moreover, defensiveness is thought to be one of the four most maladaptive relationship behaviors, along with stonewalling, criticizing, and contempt (Gottman, 1994). Indeed, spouses who are less defensive with their partners are less likely to get divorced (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Research also speaks to the relational benefits of feeling unconditionally accepted and understood, both of which should come with intrinsic affirmations. For example, whereas feeling conditionally accepted by a relationship partner has negative relationship consequences, unconditional acceptance has relational benefits, such as increased relationship satisfaction over time (e.g., Baldwin, 1997; Crocker, 2002; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2006). Along related lines, research suggests that people who feel that they are understood by significant others, along with feeling that they are validated and cared for, perceive their partners as being more responsive to their needs, which is critical for building intimacy in relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Research on self-verification, which refers to being viewed and understood by others in a manner consistent with how one sees the self—also speaks to the relational benefits of feeling understood. Self-verifying appraisals lead relationship

partners to hold appropriate expectations of one another, resulting in smoother interactions, and have been linked to greater relationship commitment and longevity (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2002). Other work suggests that feelings of verification and authenticity in one's relationships enhance relationship intimacy and quality (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998). As a final example, people who have partners who support their autonomy (i.e., support them being themselves and making their own choices) tend to be more securely attached and intimate with their partners, and accordingly, they enjoy more stable and satisfying relationships (for a review, see Deci & Ryan, 2008). In sum, the above literatures suggest that the reduced defensiveness, unconditional acceptance, and feelings of being understood that result from intrinsic affirmations have relational benefits, such as increased relationship quality.

But do intrinsic affirmations have relational benefits for all? Various strands of research suggest that people in satisfying relationships already exhibit low defensiveness in their relationships (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006), and enjoy feelings of unconditional acceptance and being understood by their partners (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the effect of recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations on enhancing relationship quality should be particularly detectable among people in less satisfying relationships.

Intrinsic Affirmations: Encouraging Constructive Responses to Negative Partner Behaviors

Beyond boosting relationship quality, intrinsic affirmations may provide relational benefits by encouraging people to engage in constructive, pro-relationship responses to negative partner behaviors. In every relationship there are times when partners hurt or disappoint each other. When this occurs, people sometimes resist their instinct to defend themselves, replacing negative responses with constructive responses instead. This may involve, for example, construing a partner's negative behavior in a positive light (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham et al., 2000). Or, when a partner's behavior violates relationship norms, it may involve trying to constructively repair the problem (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991) and forgiving the transgression (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998). Such pro-relationship responses are associated with greater relationship quality and stability, and they promote mutual cyclical growth (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Once again, people in satisfying relationships already tend to exhibit pro-relationship responses to negative relationship events; this is less true among people in dissatisfying relationships (e.g., Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Fincham et al., 2000; Rusbult et al., 1991). Accordingly, our focus was on examining whether recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations from a relationship partner promotes

pro-relationship responses to negative partner behaviors among people in less satisfying relationships.

The Current Research

In sum, our overarching hypothesis was that recalling affirmations from relationship partners would benefit individuals in less satisfying relationships, increasing their relationship quality and pro-relationship responses—but only if the affirmations affirm their intrinsic, stable qualities. We tested this hypothesis across three experiments by having participants varying in baseline relationship satisfaction levels recall a time when their romantic partner affirmed them for either (a) who they truly are as a person (intrinsic affirmation) or (b) for a deed or accomplishment (extrinsic affirmation).

Study 1 assessed whether recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations would boost relationship quality—namely, relationship satisfaction—for participants who were less satisfied at baseline. Studies 2 and 3 examined the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations on pro-relationship responses to negative partner events as well as on relationship quality. Study 2 participants completed measures of pro-relationship cognitions, including attributions of partner behaviors and recall of negative partner behaviors, as well as a different measure of relationship quality—appreciation in the relationship. Study 3 assessed pro-relationship behaviors with a measure of willingness to forgive partner transgressions, and relationship quality with a different relationship satisfaction measure than the one used in Study 1. This study improved on the earlier studies by administering the baseline relationship satisfaction measure at a separate time point from the laboratory session.

Across experiments, we compared the effects of recalling intrinsic versus extrinsic affirmations among people in relatively more and less satisfying relationships at baseline. We expected people who reported lower satisfaction at baseline to report greater relationship quality and pro-relationship responses after recalling a time of intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmation from their romantic partner. We did not expect affirmation condition to influence the responses of people who reported higher baseline satisfaction.

Study 1

Study 1 explored the effects of recalling intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations on relationship quality. We predicted that people low but not high in baseline relationship satisfaction would report increases in satisfaction in the intrinsic compared to extrinsic affirmation condition.

Method

Participants. Ninety-seven (73 female, 23 male, 1 unknown) undergraduates at a large Western university participated in small groups for course credit. Thirteen were excluded from analyses: Seven guessed the hypothesis and 6 completed the affirmation manipulation incorrectly (e.g., did not describe any event, described an event that was not an affirmation). For the remaining participants, mean age was 20 years ($SD = 1.87$, range = 18-28). Participants in all studies had to be in a romantic relationship to participate. Mean relationship length was 16.6 months ($SD = 16.45$, range = 1-91). Eleven students were cohabitating and 1 was married.

Procedure. Upon arrival, participants were seated in separate computer cubicles and completed all of the study measures on computers. To minimize suspicion, participants were told that the measures were unrelated, included in the study by different researchers. Participants first completed a baseline measure of relationship satisfaction. They were then randomly assigned to an affirmation condition as part of a writing task. Following this task, participants completed a manipulation check, and then another measure of relationship satisfaction, which was different from the baseline measure so as to minimize response bias and suspicion. After completing demographic items, participants were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and thanked.

Materials

Baseline relationship satisfaction. Participants completed a standard five-item measure of relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) using 9-point Likert-type scales (1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*). A sample item is: "I feel satisfied with our relationship." In this sample, $\alpha = .94$.

Affirmation manipulation. The affirmation manipulation involved writing about a time when participants received an intrinsic or extrinsic affirmation from their romantic partner. In the intrinsic condition, participants were instructed to describe a time when

> you felt like your partner's acceptance of you was based simply on who you are as a person . . . you felt accepted based on acting like yourself and showing your inner qualities. These qualities should refer to STABLE and ENDURING aspects of who you are, rather than temporary deeds or accomplishments.

Participants in the extrinsic condition were instructed to describe a time when

> you felt like your partner's acceptance of you was based on your meeting expectations . . . you felt accepted based on acting a certain way or doing or accomplishing something that met your partner's expectations. These deeds or accomplishments should refer to TEMPORARY EVENTS rather than to stable and enduring aspects of who you are.

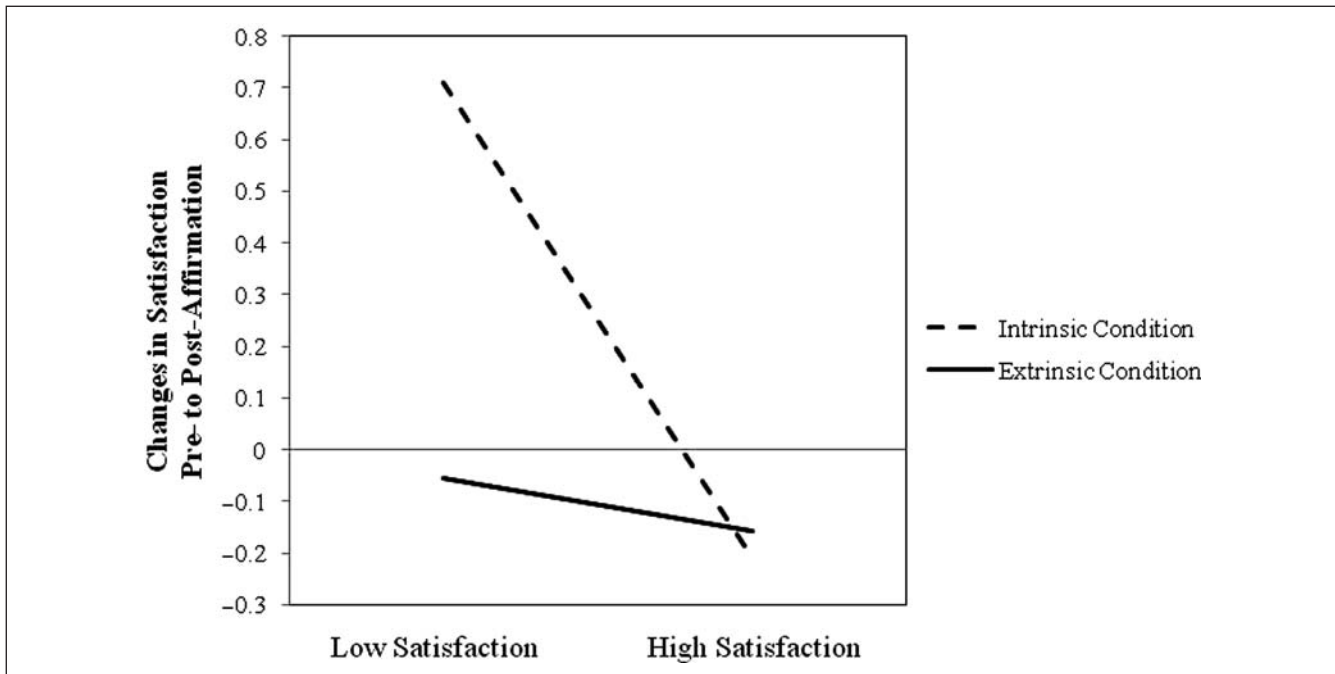Participants were instructed to spend 5-7 min on the task.

Figure 1. Changes in satisfaction as a function of baseline satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 1)

Manipulation checks. Among a set of filler adjectives, participants rated four adjectives to assess the effectiveness of the affirmation manipulation. Specifically, they rated the extent to which the event they had described in the writing task made them feel *accepted, defensive, understood*, and *insecure* using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). After reverse-scoring *defensive* and *insecure*, a composite was created (α = .80), with higher scores indicating feeling more accepted and understood, and less defensive and insecure. We expected higher scores for the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition.

Postaffirmation relationship satisfaction. Participants completed a second standard measure of relationship satisfaction, the seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). A sample item is: "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" In this sample, α = .90.

Results and Discussion

In the following analyses, we regressed manipulation-check composite scores and a relationship satisfaction change score (standardized baseline satisfaction scores subtracted from standardized postaffirmation satisfaction scores) onto standardized baseline relationship satisfaction scores, affirmation condition (coded as *intrinsic* = 1, *extrinsic* = −1), and their interaction term.[1]

Manipulation Checks. The regression for the manipulation-check composite yielded a significant effect for affirmation

condition, β = .48, p < .001. As expected, participants in the intrinsic condition reported higher composite scores, indicating that the affirmation event they had recalled made them feel more accepted and understood, and less defensive and insecure, relative to participants in the extrinsic condition. Neither the baseline satisfaction effect nor the interaction was significant, βs < .07, ps > .56.

Change in Relationship Satisfaction. The baseline satisfaction effect, β = .79, p < .001, and affirmation condition effect, β = .18, p = .001, were significant but were qualified by the predicted interaction, β = −.39, p < .001 (see Figure 1). Simple slope analyses revealed the predicted affirmation effect among low-satisfaction participants (i.e., participants 1 *SD* below the mean baseline satisfaction score), B = .38, p < .001, such that change scores were larger in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition. In contrast, the affirmation effect was not significant among high-satisfaction participants (i.e., participants 1 *SD* above the mean baseline satisfaction score), indicating that change in satisfaction among these participants did not differ as a function of recalling intrinsic versus extrinsic affirmations, B = −.02, *ns*.[2]

We also conducted single-sample t tests of the mean change score in each affirmation condition. Specifically, we first divided the sample into low- and high-satisfaction participant groups based on a median split of the distribution of baseline satisfaction scores. Among low-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition, the mean change score was significantly greater than zero, $t(15)$ = 5.05, p < .001, indicating that recalling intrinsic affirmations boosted relationship

satisfaction relative to baseline. In contrast, the mean change score among their counterparts in the extrinsic condition did not differ significantly from zero ($t < 1$), indicating no change in relationship satisfaction from baseline to postaffirmation. These analyses suggest that the predicted affirmation effect that we found among low-satisfaction participants mainly reflects increases in relationship satisfaction after recalling intrinsic affirmations rather than decreases in satisfaction after recalling extrinsic affirmations (or both).

For high-satisfaction participants, single-sample t tests showed that the mean change score was not significantly different from zero in either affirmation condition, ts = 1.2, *ns*. Thus, consistent with predictions, not only was there no affirmation effect among high-satisfaction participants, but these participants also showed no significant change in satisfaction in either affirmation condition.

Overall, Study 1's results offer initial support for our hypothesis that intrinsic versus extrinsic affirmations from relationship partners have different relationship consequences, particularly among people in less satisfying relationships. Among low- but not high-satisfaction participants, recalling affirmations for who one is as a person increased relationship satisfaction relative to baseline, whereas recalling affirmations for one's deeds and accomplishments did not.

Study 2

Study 2 examined pro-relationship responses to negative partner behaviors by assessing attributions about relationship partners' negative behaviors. People in dissatisfying relationships are more likely to view their partners' behaviors in a negative light and make fewer relationship-enhancing attributions about them (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), both of which have deleterious relationship consequences over time, including declines in satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 2000) and trust (Miller & Rempel, 2004). In Study 2 we tested whether recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations from a relationship partner would lead to more adaptive attributions about negative partner behaviors, particularly among low-satisfaction participants.

Study 2 also assessed the number and accessibility of recalled negative relationship events. Recalling more negative relationship events and having shorter recall latencies imply that negative events in one's relationship are accessible (Higgins, 1996). High accessibility of negative relationship events is associated with negative relationship outcomes, such as increasing the likelihood of interpreting ambiguous relationship events in a negative light (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996). We predicted that after recalling a time of intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmation from their partner, the number of negative behaviors recalled by low- but not high-satisfaction individuals would be decreased, and their latency in recalling these behaviors would be increased.

Finally, Study 2 included appreciation in the relationship as a measure of relationship quality. Appreciation has two aspects—feeling appreciative of one's partner and feeling appreciated by one's partner. Appreciation of one's partner is associated with increased relationship well-being for both members of the couple in everyday life and across time (Algoe, Gable & Maisel, 2010; Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2010), and people who feel appreciated by their partners report higher relationship satisfaction (Berger & Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Gordon et al., 2010). We hypothesized that low- but not high-satisfaction participants who recalled a time of intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmation from their partner would report greater appreciation in their relationship.

Method

Participants. One hundred and twenty-six (100 female, 26 male) undergraduates at a large Western university participated in small groups for course credit. Thirteen were excluded from analyses: Three guessed the hypothesis, 9 completed the affirmation manipulation incorrectly (for similar reasons described in Study 1), and 1 was uncooperative (used her cell phone during the experiment). For the remaining participants, mean age was 20.4 years (*SD* = 3.02, range = 18-41), and mean relationship length was 22.2 months (*SD* = 20.34, range = 1-108). Fifteen students were cohabitating, 1 was engaged, and 2 were married.

Procedure. The procedure for Study 2 was the same as in Study 1 except that postaffirmation participants completed (a) a measure of relationship attributions for hypothetical negative partner behaviors, (b) a timed task in which they had to recall negative relationship events, (c) a measure of appreciation in their relationship, and (d) two additional manipulation-check items.

Materials

Baseline satisfaction. Participants completed the same baseline satisfaction measured used in Study 1 (α = .90).

Affirmation manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to complete either the same intrinsic or extrinsic affirmation writing task used in Study 1.

Relationship attributions. Participants reported their attributions for various hypothetical partner behaviors using the Relationship Attribution Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Specifically, participants read three hypothetical negative partner behaviors (e.g., "Your partner doesn't give you the support you need") interspersed among two positive partner behaviors that served as filler items. For each behavior, participants rated six statements that measured (a) the locus of control, (b) the stability of the behavior, (c) the globality of the behavior, (d) the intentionality of the behavior, (e) the degree to which the partner's behavior was motivated by selfish rather than unselfish concerns, and (f) the degree to

which the partner deserved to be blamed for the behavior. The items were rated on 6-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Ratings for the negative behaviors were summed to create a score reflecting attributions of causality and responsibility for negative partner behaviors. Higher scores indicated that participants believed the locus of the cause to be within their partner, the cause was stable and global, their partner did the negative behavior intentionally (with motivation), and blaming the partner was justified (α = .84).

Number and accessibility of negative relationship events. Participants were given 3 min to "list as many events as you can recall where your partner did something that upset you, made you unhappy, or let you down" using one complete sentence for each event. After typing each event in a textbox, participants were instructed to press the *enter* key so that a new textbox would appear. In addition to assessing the number of events recalled, we assessed participants' latency of retrieving these events as a measure of their accessibility. Specifically, for each event, we recorded the time it took from the moment a new textbox was displayed until the participant started typing the event.

Appreciation. As a measure of relationship quality, participants completed the 18-item Appreciation in Relationship scale (Gordon et al., 2010) using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). This scale includes items assessing both feeling appreciative of one's partner (α = .88) and feeling appreciated by one's partner (α = .86). Sample items include: "I appreciate my partner" and "My partner makes me feel special."

Manipulation checks. We once again created a composite of participants' ratings of the adjectives *accepted, understood, insecure,* and *defensive,* with the latter two reverse-scored (α = .83). Participants also completed two additional questions about the affirmation writing task using 9-point Likert-type scales (0 = *not at all,* 8 = *very much*): "How much did that task reflect who your partner thinks you really are as a person?" and "How much did that task reflect how important your partner thinks your accomplishments are?"

Results and Discussion

In the following analyses, we regressed the manipulation-check variables and each of our outcome variables onto standardized baseline relationship satisfaction scores, affirmation condition (coded as *intrinsic* = 1, *extrinsic* = –1), and their interaction term.

Manipulation Checks. As in Study 1, affirmation condition significantly predicted participants' responses to the adjectives manipulation check such that intrinsic participants felt more accepted and understood, and less defensive and insecure than did extrinsic participants, β = .41, p < .001. Furthermore, intrinsic participants reported that the writing task reflected who their partner thinks they really are as a person

more so than extrinsic participants, β = .36, p < .001. Affirmation condition did not affect how much participants felt that the writing task reflected how important their partner thinks their accomplishments are, β = –.08, *ns*. Baseline satisfaction did not have a significant effect on any of the manipulation checks, nor did it moderate the effect of affirmation condition, βs < .11, *p*s > .27.

Pro-Relationship Responses and Relationship Quality

Attributions. For attributions, there was a baseline satisfaction effect, β = –.33, p < .001, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, β = .20, p < .05 (see Figure 2). Simple slope analyses revealed an unexpected affirmation effect among high-satisfaction participants, B = 1.80, p < .05, reflecting fewer negative attributions in the extrinsic relative to intrinsic condition, a finding we return to in the General Discussion.

Among low-satisfaction participants, the affirmation effect was not significant, B = –.83, *ns*, but the slope was in the predicted direction with fewer negative attributions in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition. Moreover, when we conducted simple slope analyses to examine the satisfaction effect in each affirmation condition, we found that whereas low-satisfaction participants made more negative attributions than high-satisfaction participants in the extrinsic condition, B = 3.48, p < .001, low-satisfaction participants who recalled an intrinsic affirmation were comparable to their high-satisfaction counterparts in the intrinsic condition, B = –.86, *ns*. In other words, consistent with our hypotheses, these analyses suggest that recalling intrinsic affirmations are more beneficial than recalling extrinsic affirmations for low-satisfaction participants in that these individuals were comparable to their high-satisfaction counterparts in the intrinsic but not extrinsic condition.

Number and accessibility of recalled negative relationship events. Before analyzing the number and accessibility of recalled negative relationship events, we excluded 2 participants who did not complete the task at all and 7 who completed it incorrectly (e.g., wrote the same event repeatedly). The analysis of the number of negative events recalled yielded a baseline satisfaction effect, β = –.26, p < .01, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, β = .24, p < .05 (see Figure 3, Panel A). As predicted, simple slope analyses showed that whereas there was no affirmation effect among high-satisfaction participants, B = .41, *ns*, low-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition recalled fewer negative events than low-satisfaction participants in the extrinsic condition, B = –.91, p < .05.

To create a composite reflecting the latency of recalling negative relationship events, we averaged participants' latencies for the first six events recalled, given that participants recalled 5.91 events on average (range = 1-18). This composite was log-transformed to account for the highly skewed nature of reaction time data. For this composite, we found
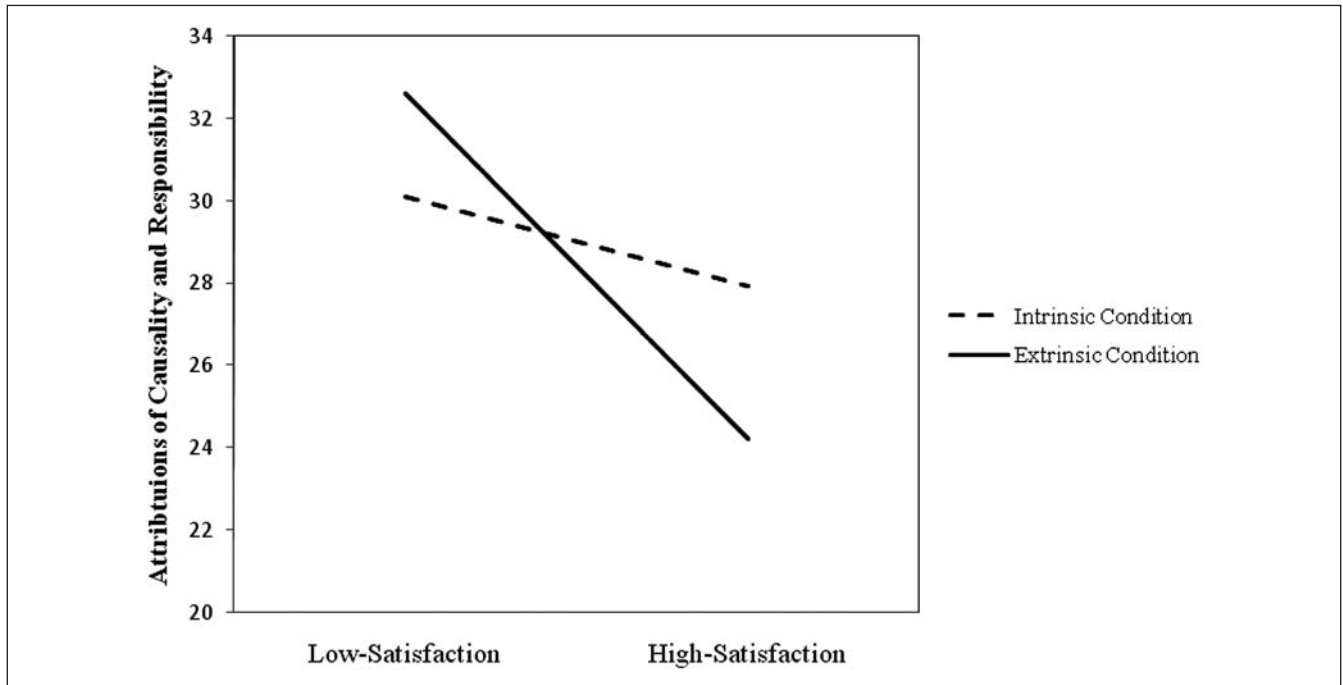
Figure 2. Attributions of causality and responsibility for hypothetical negative partner behaviors as a function of baseline relationship satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 2)
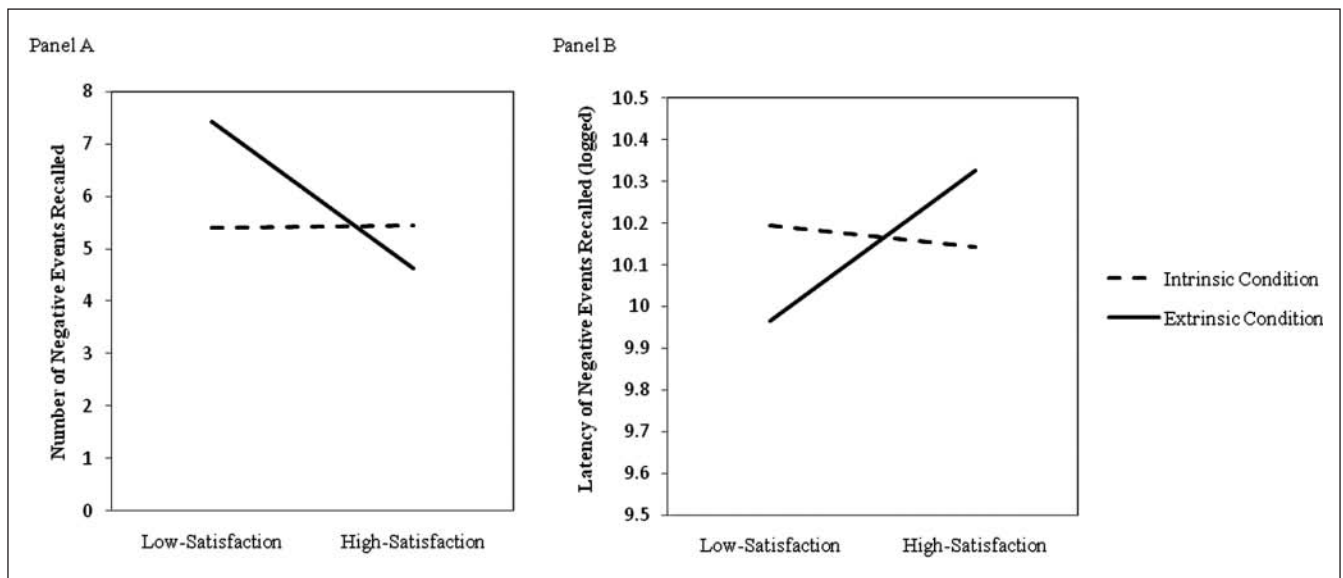Higher numbers indicate more partner-blaming attributions.

Figure 3. Number and latency of negative relationship events recalled as a function of baseline relationship satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 2)

the predicted interaction, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 3, Panel B). Once again, there was no significant affirmation effect among high-satisfaction participants, $B = -.08$, *ns*, whereas low-satisfaction participants were marginally significantly slower to recall negative relationship events in the

intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition, $B = -1.07$, $p = .057$, indicating lower accessibility of these events in the intrinsic condition, as predicted.

Appreciation. High- relative to low-satisfaction participants were more appreciative of their partners after the affirmation
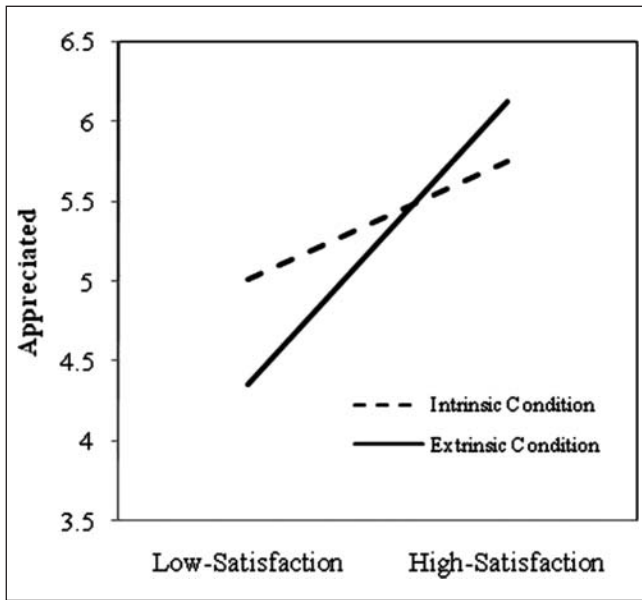
Figure 4. Feeling appreciated as a function of baseline relationship satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 2)

writing task, $\beta = .57$, $p < .001$. There were no other effects for how appreciative participants felt. High-satisfaction participants also reported feeling more appreciated by their partners, $\beta = .47$, $p < .001$, but this effect was qualified by the predicted interaction, $\beta = -.18$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 4). Simple slope analyses showed that whereas there was no significant affirmation effect among high-satisfaction individuals, $B = -.17$, *ns*, low-satisfaction individuals felt marginally significantly more appreciated by their partners in the intrinsic compared to extrinsic condition, $B = .27$, $p = .08$, as predicted.

Overall, Study 2 replicated and extended Study 1 by showing that among low- but not high-satisfaction participants, recalling intrinsic affirmations from relationship partners increased pro-relationship responses and relationship quality relative to recalling extrinsic affirmations. Specifically, low-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition made adaptive attributions about hypothetical negative partner behaviors at levels similar to their high-satisfaction counterparts. They also recalled fewer negative relationship events, and did so more slowly, and felt more appreciated than low-satisfaction participants in the extrinsic condition.

Although the majority of our manipulation-check results suggested that our affirmation manipulation was effective, extrinsic participants did not report that the affirmation event they wrote about reflected their partner's acceptance of their accomplishments more so than did intrinsic participants. This may be because the latter individuals, who were feeling all-around accepted by their partners, also felt high levels of acceptance for their deeds and accomplishments. We return to this issue in Study 3.

Study 3

In Study 3, we improved on and extended the first two studies in several respects. Specifically, we had participants complete the baseline measure of relationship satisfaction before the laboratory session, and we added examples to the instructions for the affirmation writing task to reduce the number of participants who completed the task incorrectly. We also assessed pro-relationship responses to negative partner behaviors with a different measure from those used in the prior studies—namely, willingness to forgive the transgressions of one's partner. Partners will inevitably behave in an unfavorable way at some point, and people's willingness to forgive their partners facilitates later closeness and commitment (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). Research shows that people in less satisfying relationships are less likely to forgive their partners (e.g., Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007). Thus, once again, our focus was on low-satisfaction participants. Specifically, we predicted that recalling a time of intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmation would boost low- but not high-satisfaction participants' willingness to forgive.

We also measured relationship quality with a new relationship satisfaction scale—the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007)—which is the result of an item response theory analysis of 180 items from the most popular relationship satisfaction measures. The CSI is designed to include items that help capture the most information at both the upper and lower ends of the satisfaction spectrum. We predicted that, as in Study 1, low- but not high-satisfaction participants would report greater satisfaction in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition.

Method

Participants. Forty-four (40 female, 4 male) undergraduates at a large Western university participated in small groups for course credit. Two were excluded from analyses for guessing the hypothesis and 2 others were excluded because we could not link their baseline and laboratory data. Mean age of the remaining participants was 20 years ($SD = 2.69$, range = 18-29). Mean relationship length was 19.68 months ($SD = 18.64$, range = 1-96). Six participants were cohabitating, two were engaged, and one was married.

Procedure. Participants completed an online baseline measure of relationship satisfaction on average 1 week before the laboratory session ($SD = 10.36$, range = 0-56 days). In the session, participants were given the affirmation writing task from the experimenter, who was blind to condition. Next, participants were given the forgiveness measure to complete, after which they completed the postaffirmation measure of satisfaction. Finally, participants completed demographic information and manipulation checks, and then were probed for suspicion, debriefed, and thanked.

Materials

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed at both time points using the four-item version of the CSI (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Participants rated their agreement with each item using a 6-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*). A sample item is: "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?" The post-affirmation satisfaction measure was adapted to assess current feelings of satisfaction (e.g., "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner *right now*?"). Reliability was high at both time points (baseline, α = .88; postaffirmation, α = .91).

Affirmation manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to an affirmation condition and given 7 min to write about a time when they experienced either an intrinsic or extrinsic affirmation from their partner. Participants in the intrinsic condition were instructed to describe a time when

> you felt like your partner affirmed you for who you truly are . . . a time when you felt like your partner affirmed and accepted you for acting like yourself and showing your inner qualities. These qualities should refer to stable and enduring aspects of who you are, rather than to temporary deeds or accomplishments.

Participants were given examples of intrinsic affirmations such as "compliment a personality trait." Participants in the extrinsic condition were instructed to describe a time when

> you felt like your partner's affirmation of you was based on something you did or accomplished . . . a time when you felt like your partner affirmed and accepted you for doing or accomplishing something. These deeds or accomplishments should refer to temporary events rather than to stable and enduring aspects of who you are.

Participants were given examples of extrinsic affirmations such as "tell us we cooked a great meal."

Forgiveness. We assessed pro-relationship responses with a measure of willingness to forgive (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007). Using 9-point Likert-type scales (1 = *I would not forgive at all*, 9 = *I would forgive completely*), participants responded to how they would deal with 12 hypothetical situations in which their partner engaged in a negative behavior (e.g., "Your partner is flirtatious with his/her ex"; α = .89).

Manipulation checks. As in Study 2, after being reminded about the affirmation writing task, participants were asked: "How much did that task reflect how much your partner affirms and accepts you for who you are as a person?" and "How much did that task reflect how much your partner affirms and accepts you for your deeds and accomplishments?"

Participants responded to these items using 9-point Likert-type scales (0 = *not at all*, 8 = *very much*).

To bolster our manipulation checks, we had two coders, blind to condition, rate participants' affirmation narratives. Specifically, the coders rated: "How much does this narrative reflect how much the participant's partner affirms and accepts him/her for who he/she is as a person?" and "How much does this narrative reflect how much the participant's partner affirms and accepts him/her for his/her deeds and accomplishments?" using the same Likert-type scale described previously. Coders showed adequate agreement on both questions (as a person, α = .71; accomplishments, α = .75); thus, we averaged their ratings for each question.

Results and Discussion

In the following analyses, we regressed the manipulation checks, forgiveness scores, and relationship satisfaction change scores (standardized baseline satisfaction scores subtracted from standardized postaffirmation satisfaction scores) onto standardized baseline relationship satisfaction scores, affirmation condition (coded as *intrinsic* = 1, *extrinsic* = –1), and their interaction term.

Manipulation Checks. Intrinsic participants felt the affirmation event they had described reflected how much their partner affirms them for who they are as a person more so than extrinsic participants, β = .33, *p* < .05. As in Study 2, however, intrinsic and extrinsic participants did not differ in their rating of how much the event reflected their partner affirming them for their deeds and accomplishments, β = –.14, *ns*. Neither the baseline satisfaction effect nor the interaction term was significant for either manipulation check, βs < .14, *p*s > .42.

In terms of the coders' ratings, narratives from intrinsic participants were coded as being more about partners affirming participants for who they are as a person than were narratives from extrinsic participants, β = .79, *p* < .001. In contrast, extrinsic condition narratives were coded as being more about partners affirming deeds and accomplishments than were intrinsic condition narratives β = –.88, *p* < .001. The narratives of low-satisfaction participants were marginally significantly rated as being more about partners affirming the participants for who they are as people, β = –.20, *p* = .06. Neither the other baseline satisfaction effect nor the interaction terms were significant, βs < .12, *p*s > .21. On balance, then, our manipulation-check results suggest that our affirmation manipulation was effective.

Pro-Relationship Responses and Relationship Quality

Forgiveness. For willingness to forgive, we found the predicted interaction, β = –.31, *p* = .05 (see Figure 5). However, simple slope analyses revealed an unexpected marginal affirmation effect among high-satisfaction individuals reflecting marginally significantly more willingness to forgive in the
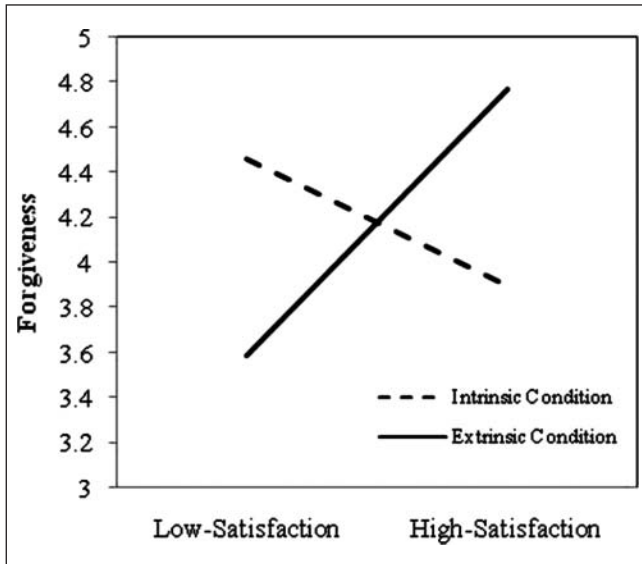
Figure 5. Willingness to forgive as a function of baseline satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 3)

Figure 6. Changes in satisfaction as a function of baseline satisfaction and affirmation condition (Study 3)

extrinsic relative to intrinsic condition, $B = -.45$, $p = .07$. Also unexpected, low-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic and extrinsic conditions did not differ in their willingness to forgive, $B = .30$, *ns*. However, the slope was in the predicted direction, with greater forgiveness in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition. In addition, simple slope analyses examining the satisfaction effect in each affirmation condition showed that low-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition were willing to forgive their partners at the same high levels as high-satisfaction participants in the same affirmation condition, $B = -.16$, *ns*, whereas low-satisfaction participants in the extrinsic condition were less willing than their high-satisfaction counterparts to forgive their partner, $B = .59$, $p < .05$.

Overall, the results for forgiveness were reminiscent of those seen in Study 2 for attributions for hypothetical negative partner behaviors. We discuss the unexpected marginal affirmation effect for high-satisfaction individuals in the General Discussion. In terms of low-satisfaction participants, as was the case for attributions in Study 2, although the predicted affirmation effect was not significant, recalling intrinsic affirmations still appeared to benefit these participants more so than recalling extrinsic affirmations in that these participants' likelihood of forgiving was at a level comparable to that of their high-satisfaction counterparts in the intrinsic but not extrinsic condition.

Change in relationship satisfaction. For change in relationship satisfaction from baseline to postaffirmation, there was a baseline satisfaction effect, $\beta = -.46$, $p < .01$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction, $\beta = -.47$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 6). Replicating Study 1, simple slope analyses revealed the predicted affirmation effect among low-satisfaction
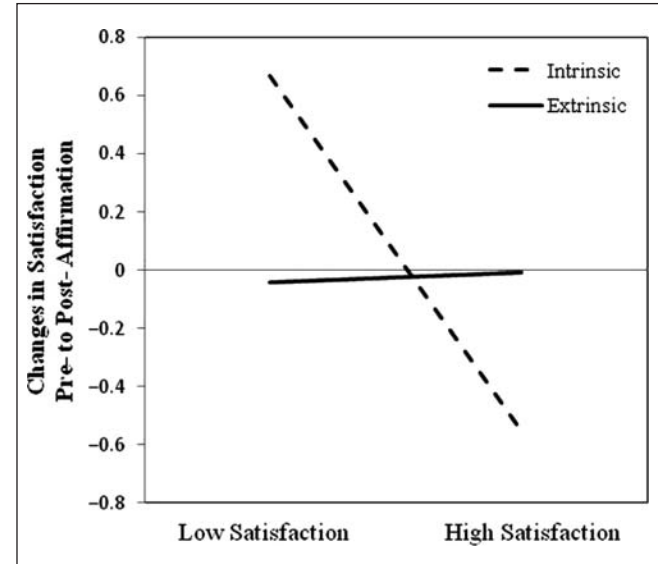
participants, $B = .41$, $p < .01$, such that change scores were larger in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition. Furthermore, single-sample *t* tests for low-satisfaction participants (determined on the basis of a median split of the distribution of baseline satisfaction scores) showed that the mean change score was significantly greater than zero in the intrinsic condition, $t(6) = 2.71$, $p < .05$, indicating that recalling intrinsic affirmations boosted relationship satisfaction. In contrast, the mean change score among low-satisfaction counterparts in the extrinsic condition did not differ significantly from zero ($t < 1$), indicating no change in relationship satisfaction from baseline to postaffirmation. As in Study 1, these analyses suggest that the predicted affirmation effect found among low-satisfaction participants mainly reflects increases in relationship satisfaction after recalling intrinsic affirmations rather than decreases in satisfaction after recalling extrinsic affirmations (or both).

Turning to high-satisfaction participants, simple slope analyses revealed a marginal affirmation effect for change in satisfaction such that high-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition reported marginally significant declines in satisfaction from baseline to postaffirmation relative to their high-satisfaction counterparts in the extrinsic condition, $B = -.25$, $p = .07$. Single-sample *t* tests conducted for high-satisfaction participants (determined on the basis of a median split of the distribution of baseline satisfaction scores) showed that recalling intrinsic affirmations resulted in a significant decrease in satisfaction, $t(11) = -4.4$, $p < .01$, whereas recalling extrinsic affirmations led to no change in satisfaction, $t(5) = -1.7$, $p = .15$.

We cannot know for certain why there was a significant decrease in satisfaction in the intrinsic condition among

high-satisfaction participants. This same decrease was not seen among Study 1's high-satisfaction participants in the intrinsic condition. To speculate, perhaps the decrease seen in this study occurred as a result of participants being asked to imagine being betrayed by their partner as part of the forgiveness measure, coupled with the fact that baseline satisfaction was high among these participants ($M = 5.56$ out of 6). The same decrease may not have been seen in the extrinsic condition because recalling an extrinsic affirmation, and the contingent acceptance it implies, triggered a compensatory response among high-satisfaction participants, a possibility we discuss further in the General Discussion. Overall, more research is needed to explore this unexpected effect among high-satisfaction participants given that it was not replicated in Study 1. In contrast, our key findings involving low-satisfaction participants in both affirmation conditions were consistent across studies.

In sum, Study 3 largely replicated and extended the findings of the first two studies, even with the use of a separate, earlier time point for measuring baseline satisfaction, and the use of different measures of pro-relationship responses and relationship quality. Low-satisfaction participants who recalled a time when their partner affirmed them for who they are as a person were willing to forgive their partner's transgressions at levels comparable to their more satisfied counterparts, and reported significant increases in relationship quality relative to low-satisfaction participants in the extrinsic condition, who showed no change in satisfaction.

As in Study 2, participants in the two affirmation conditions did not differ in their rating of how much the affirmation event they recalled reflected their partner accepting them for their deeds and accomplishments. However, blind coders' ratings indicated that the intrinsic narratives were significantly more about partners' acceptance of intrinsic qualities than were the extrinsic narratives, whereas the latter were significantly more about being accepted for deeds and accomplishments than the former. Perhaps then, as suggested earlier, intrinsic participants were reporting high levels of acceptance for their achievements as a spillover effect of feeling highly accepted for who they are as a person.

General Discussion

Past research has shown that intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations benefit individuals by reducing psychological defensiveness in a variety of achievement and social domains (Arndt et al., 2002; Schimel et al., 2001; Schimel et al., 2004). Our research extends this initial work to the domain of romantic relationships by examining the relational benefits of recalling intrinsic versus extrinsic affirmations from one's romantic partner. We reasoned that the reduced defensiveness, along with the feelings of unconditional acceptance and being understood, that are associated with receiving intrinsic affirmations should have positive relationship consequences,

particularly among people in relatively dissatisfying relationships. Supporting this, the results of three studies showed that for people low in baseline satisfaction, intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations are beneficial not just for the individual but also for the source of these affirmations in that they encourage the individual to respond constructively when the source (in the current research, the romantic partner) engages in negative behaviors, and increase perceptions of the quality of the relationship with the source.

Our findings suggest that if people in less satisfying relationships focus on times when their partner has intrinsically affirmed them, or take the time to intrinsically affirm their partners, they may be able to start a positive upward cycle in their relationship. For example, people who concentrate on times when they felt intrinsically affirmed by their partner may be more willing to give their partner the benefit of the doubt the next time he or she engages in a negative behavior. In turn, they may find their partners to be more understanding and forgiving of them.

Relationship Satisfaction as a Moderator

We hypothesized that intrinsic affirmations should have relational benefits given research linking reduced defensiveness, unconditional acceptance, and being understood—all of which should come with intrinsic affirmations—to positive relational outcomes. However, because various strands of research suggest that people in satisfying relationships already enjoy these consequences of intrinsic affirmations, we predicted that the hypothesis would hold mainly among people in dissatisfying relationships. In other words, we predicted that relationship satisfaction would moderate the effects of intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations on relationship quality and pro-relationship responses.

By treating relationship satisfaction as a moderator variable, we join considerable prior research showing the moderating effects of satisfaction on a variety of relationship processes and outcomes (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Manne et al., 2007). However, exactly why relationship satisfaction, a multifaceted construct, serves as a moderator may differ depending on the processes and/or phenomena in question. We believe that baseline satisfaction moderated the affirmation effects in the current studies because of differences between low- and high-satisfaction individuals in defensiveness and feelings of unconditional acceptance and being understood. Nonetheless, future research that directly tests the critical ingredients of relationship satisfaction that account for its moderating role in our studies would be useful.

The Role of Intrinsic Affirmations in Satisfying Relationships

By and large, people who were high in baseline relationship satisfaction reported relatively high levels of pro-relationship

behaviors and relationship quality regardless of affirmation condition. Perhaps the reason our affirmation manipulation did not seem to have an effect among high-satisfaction participants is because these individuals regularly receive intrinsic affirmations from their partner. Preliminary results from a cross-sectional study on affirmations and relationship quality in daily life show that people who are more satisfied with their relationships feel more intrinsically affirmed by their partners, $r(111) = .58$, $p < .001$ (Gordon & Chen, 2010). So, for high-satisfaction individuals, recalling an intrinsic affirmation may not show any substantive effect because they already have a solid foundation of feeling intrinsically affirmed.

Interestingly, for two of the seven outcome variables examined across our three studies—namely, attributions for hypothetical negative partner behaviors (Study 2) and forgiveness (Study 3)—high-satisfaction participants reported higher pro-relationship responses in the extrinsic relative to intrinsic condition. We can only speculate on why this was the case. These individuals reported that they felt less accepted and understood, and more defensive and insecure, as a result of receiving an extrinsic relative to intrinsic affirmation from their partner, but still responded constructively. Research has shown that individuals with high self-esteem react to potential threats to the self by responding even more positively in their relationship (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). Perhaps our high-satisfaction participants were reacting in a similar, compensatory manner by responding to potential contingent evaluation with behaviors that enhance their relationship and ensure their partners' acceptance. Research that directly tests this and other potential explanations is clearly needed.

Limitations and Future Directions

In Study 2, intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations boosted how appreciated but not how appreciative low-satisfaction participants felt. This may be because intrinsic affirmations direct people to consider how their partners feel about them, not how they feel about their partners. However, over time we would expect that people who are consistently intrinsically affirmed by their partners would see their partner as fulfilling more of their needs and therefore feel more appreciative of their partners than would people who did not receive such affirmations. Future research is needed to test this possibility, but consistent with it, high-satisfaction participants in Study 2 reported higher levels of feeling appreciative overall. In addition, results from the cross-sectional study described previously show a positive association between intrinsic affirmations and feeling appreciative, $r = .39$, $p < .001$, and no such association between extrinsic affirmations and feeling appreciative, $r = .14$, *ns.*

Our central hypothesis was that intrinsic affirmations would have more relational benefits *relative* to extrinsic

affirmations among people in dissatisfying relationships. However, Studies 1 and 3 included change in relationship satisfaction from baseline to postaffirmation as an outcome variable. Analyses of this change variable showed that among low-satisfaction participants, the predicted affirmation effect reflected increases in satisfaction in the intrinsic condition, but no change in satisfaction in the extrinsic condition. Does this imply that extrinsic affirmations have no effect? Given that our other outcome variables were not change scores, we cannot answer this question definitively. Perhaps for some outcomes and/or some individuals, extrinsic affirmations exert harmful effects rather than no effect. Alternatively, as speculated previously, extrinsic affirmations may trigger compensatory responses among some individuals (e.g., high-satisfaction individuals) that actually lead to better outcomes. More research is needed to address this important issue.

To better understand the role of affirmations in romantic relationships, we need to conduct research that captures the nature of intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations in everyday life. Initial results from the same cross-sectional study suggest that intrinsic and extrinsic affirmations are frequent in daily life. The average level of intrinsic affirmation by one's partner was 6.28 out of 7 ($SD = .90$) and the average level of extrinsic affirmation was 5.04 ($SD = 1.79$). Methodology such as daily experience sampling may be particularly poised to capture affirmations from relationship partners and their downstream consequences.

Another important extension of the current work will be to examine whether intrinsic affirmations that come from someone outside of the relationship will also have benefits for that relationship. For example, would receiving words of praise at work focusing on one's stable, intrinsic qualities lead people to return home at the end of the day more willing to give their partners the benefit of doubt? In reverse, do intrinsic affirmations from a significant other have consequences for domains extending beyond the relationship? We speculate that our effects are not specific to affirmations from one's romantic partner, such that affirmations from outside the relationship could nonetheless affect responses within the relationship. Conversely, we speculate that affirmations from a relationship partner may influence responses outside the relationship. We base these speculations, which we hasten to acknowledge await direct empirical testing, in the broader literature on self-affirmation. In this extensive literature (for a recent meta-analytic review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006), researchers have frequently documented the effects of an affirmation manipulation (e.g., writing about an important personal value, receiving positive feedback) on responses in domains that are completely unrelated to the affirmation domain (e.g., stereotypical judgments about a target, perceptions of health risks). In other words, being affirmed in one domain can affect responses in a different domain. Thus, it stands to reason that affirmations from

outside of one's relationship can affect the relationship, just as affirmations from within the relationship can have an effect outside of it.

Another question to ask is whether our findings generalize to other relationship types. That is, do intrinsic affirmations from friends, parents, or bosses have the same benefits as intrinsic affirmations from romantic partners? Research has shown that affirmations from even, for example, an experimenter can affect participants' responses (Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999). Thus, we speculate that affirmations from any relationship partner should have the potential to impact both responses within and beyond that relationship.

Finally, our research sheds light on the importance of recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations but does not provide detailed information about the effects of actual affirmation experiences. Thus, we cannot know from our results whether, for example, high-satisfaction people receive more intrinsic affirmations from their relationship partners or whether they simply recognize, attend to, or perceive more intrinsic affirmations from their partners. Although we believe that studying the recall of affirmations is an important first step, future research that examines the influence of actual affirmation events is needed.

Concluding Comments

Taken together, the present experiments suggest that affirmations may be important for individual and relationship well-being, but not all affirmations are equally beneficial. Our findings indicate that for individuals in dissatisfying relationships, recalling intrinsic relative to extrinsic affirmations from one's romantic partner boosts pro-relationship behaviors and relationship quality.

Authors' Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. To examine whether differences on our dependent variables were due to differences in positive affect after the affirmation manipulation, in Studies 1 and 2 we created a composite from the filler adjectives in the adjectives manipulation check using the adjectives *loved, happy,* and *proud* as a proxy for positive affect (Study 1, $\alpha = .82$; Study 2, $\alpha = .81$). Participants in the intrinsic relative to extrinsic condition reported higher composite scores postaffirmation in both Study 1 (intrinsic, $M = 5.94$; extrinsic, $M = 5.20$), $t(80) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, and Study 2 (intrinsic, $M = 6.04$; extrinsic, $M = 4.99$), $t(111) = 4.39$, $p < .001$. We therefore conducted all of the analyses in Studies 1 and 2 controlling for this positive-affect composite. None of the results differed substantially from those we have reported, suggesting that positive affect does not account for our findings.

2. In Study 1 there was a significant three-way interaction between baseline satisfaction, affirmation condition, and gender, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$, indicating that the interaction between baseline satisfaction and affirmation condition was stronger for males than for females. However, when we examined males and females separately, the predicted two-way interaction between baseline satisfaction and affirmation condition was in the same direction for both males and females and was significant for both gender groups (males, $\beta = -.33$, $p < .05$; females: $\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$). In Study 2, there were no gender effects. We did not test for gender differences in Study 3 given that there were only 4 males. Overall, then, we did not find consistent gender differences, but given the small percentage of males in all three experiments, the lack of gender effects should be interpreted with caution.

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