Research Article

Taking on Board Liability-Focused Information

Close Positive Relationships as a Self-Bolstering Resource

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ABSTRACT—*Do close positive relationships function as a self-bolstering resource, armoring the self against potentially threatening information? After taking a difficult and important intellectual ability test, participants visualized a relationship that was close positive, close negative, or neutral (Experiment 1) or a relationship that was close positive, close negative, distant positive, or distant negative (Experiment 2). All participants received bogus unfavorable feedback about their performance and subsequently indicated their interest in obtaining further liability-focused information about the performance domain and the underlying intellectual ability. Participants who visualized close positive relationships expressed the highest interest in receiving such information, despite rating it as unpleasant. State self-esteem and mood did not account for this effect, although warm affect for the relational partner did. Close positive relationships function as a psychological resource that bolsters the self against feedback about a newly discovered liability to the point where receptivity to additional liability-relevant information actually increases.*

An emerging literature illustrates two intriguing implications of psychological resources for the self-system. First, a prior opportunity to bolster the self-system reduces the need for consistency- or esteem-seeking behavior. For example, self-affirmation (e.g., writing about cherished values) eliminates attitudinal change in the forced-compliance paradigm (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999) and reduces the propensity to stereotype (Fein & Spencer, 1997) or distance oneself from friends (Tesser & Cornell, 1991). Second, a prior opportunity to bolster the self-system opens up the individual to challenges and opportunities. For example, compared with negative experiences, positive experiences (e.g., feelings of success, good mood, sense of control) increase tolerance to opposing political views (G.L. Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000) and the likelihood of seeking and accepting unfavorable feedback (Aspinwall, 1998; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002; Trope, Gervey, & Bolger, 2003). In this article, we are concerned with the role of psychological resources in the solicitation of unfavorable information about the self.

Extrapolating from the findings we have just summarized, Tesser (2000) proposed the substitution principle, according to which psychological resources are interchangeable within the self-system. This principle legitimizes investigation into the relevance for the self-system of a social resource: close positive relationships. Such relationships likely convey a sense of unconditional acceptance and constitute an integral part of the self (Aron et al., 2005): Activation of mental representations of close others influences self-perceptions (Andersen & Saribay, 2005), self-evaluations (Baldwin & Dandeneau, 2005), and personal goal evaluations (Shah, 2003). More to the point, close relationships have resource potential. For example, priming of a secure attachment style lowers stress (McGowan, 2002), buffers existential anxiety (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), and promotes compassion and altruism (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Additionally, secure attachment styles are associated with softening the blow of various stressors, such as first-time pregnancy, the birth of an infant with heart disease, or combat training (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Moreover, close relationships provide social support, thereby alleviating symptoms of stress (S. Cohen & Wills, 1985), depression (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968), and trauma (Hofball & London, 1986), as well as fostering an overly positive self-view, exaggerated perceptions of control, and unrealistic optimism (Martz et al., 1998).

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In contrast, close negative relationships can and often do have undesirable consequences (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), as they convey conditional acceptance (Baldwin, 1997). Indeed, conflict in distressed couples escalates through mutual invalidation (Reis & Patrick, 1996). Close negative relationships can be damaging to psychological health. Criticism from close others is linked with depression (Besser & Priel, 2003), and wives' marital dissatisfaction predicts later depression (Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997). Thus, close negative relationships undermine the self.

This literature review suggests that close positive relationships function as a self-bolstering resource. We therefore hypothesized that activation of mental representations of close positive relationships increases willingness to obtain accurate information about one's weaknesses in a performance domain, even in the face of prior failure feedback in that domain. That is, close positive relationships may bolster and shield the self to the point where, even following unfavorable feedback, accurate information about personal liabilities is sought out despite its self-threat potential.

Our hypothesis is consistent with recent findings that dispositional or primed secure attachment styles facilitate exploratory intentions (Green & Campbell, 2000) and cognitive openness (Green-Hennessy & Reis, 1998; Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). At the same time, our research advances this growing literature by addressing whether cognitive activation of close positive relationships leads to higher receptivity to information about a newly discovered weakness. Moreover, our research isolates the consequences for the self of close positive, close negative, distant positive, and distant negative relationships; that is, our study disentangles relationship closeness from relationship valence in terms of their impact on what people wish to discover about themselves.

We tested our hypothesis through planned contrasts in two experiments. Participants were University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill undergraduates fulfilling an option in an introductory psychology course. They were mostly (70%) female, although gender produced no significant effects in preliminary analyses—perhaps because of the low proportion of male participants—and was therefore excluded from further consideration. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions of near-balanced factorial designs, tested individually, collectively unsuspicious about the experimental hypothesis, and debriefed and thanked at the conclusion of each session. The degrees of freedom vary slightly in the reported analyses, because a negligible number of participants did not complete the requisite scales.

EXPERIMENT 1

Although we were concerned mostly with close positive and close negative relationships, we included a neutral-relationships condition in Experiment 1 for comparative purposes (i.e., do close negative relationships influence information seeking differently from neutral relationships?). Participants completed an intelligence test and thought about a close positive, close negative, or neutral relationship. Following unfavorable feedback, they indicated their interest in liability-focused information about their intelligence. We hypothesized that participants who had thought about close positive relationships would express more interest in receiving liability-focused information than those in the close-negative-relationships and neutral-relationships conditions combined.

Method

The cover story informed participants ($n = 110$) that they would engage in an intrapersonal and an interpersonal task. The former was the computer-administered "Alport-Jameson Intelligence Test," which consisted of difficult verbal, mathematical, and analytical questions similar to those on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Participants were to respond to each question within 25 to 45 s. This 20-min test was allegedly in use since 1995, taken by more than 110,000 university students nationwide, and considered an indisputably valid and reliable measure of intelligence. Upon test completion, participants learned that they would soon receive feedback along with a comprehensive and individualized profile of their intelligence.

The interpersonal task (*relationship visualization task*) followed. Participants in the close-positive-relationships condition thought of "a warm and positive relationship . . . of that special person with whom you have the *best* relationship of all." They wrote down the initials of this person's name, as well as the nature of their relationship (*relationship type*), and spent 3 min answering each of the following questions: "What does this relationship personally mean to you?"; "Why is this relationship so important and special to you personally?"; "What are the most wonderful aspects of the relationship for you?"; "How does the relationship make you feel?", and "Imagine this person sitting next to you at this very moment. How would you feel?" Participants in the close-negative-relationships condition thought of "a cold and negative relationship . . . of the person with whom you have the *worst* relationship of all . . . a person with whom you have to (or are obligated to) interact regularly." After writing down the initials of the person's name and the relationship type, participants in this condition spent 3 min answering each of five questions, two of which were different from the questions in the close-positive-relationships condition ("Why is this relationship so negative for you personally?" and "What are the least desirable aspects of the relationship for you?"). Finally, participants in the neutral-relationships condition thought of "a distant relationship . . . of a person with whom you have a truly *neutral* relationship . . . a person whom you don't know well and neither like nor dislike." They then proceeded with tasks analogous to those of the other conditions.

Next, participants received bogus performance feedback ostensibly based on norms well validated within the undergradu-

ate student population at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Participants learned that their scores fell at the 41st percentile and their performance was "poor." After responding to the *performance-satisfaction* manipulation check ("How pleased are you with your performance on the intelligence test?"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*), participants learned that a profile of their intelligence had been compiled and they would be given an opportunity to receive additional performance-related information that was accurate, specified their weak points and difficulties in each intelligence domain, and could help them improve their performance.

Then, participants responded to three questions assessing their *interest in liability-focused information* about their intelligence (following a brief introduction of what this term means): (a) "How interested are you in reading detailed liability-focused information?"; (b) "To what extent would you be willing to go out of your way to obtain detailed liability-focused information?"; and (c) "To what extent would you like us to recommend further sources that would provide you with even more detailed liability-focused information?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*). Finally, participants responded to two additional manipulation checks: *test difficulty* ("How easy/difficult did you find the Alport-Jameson Intelligence Test?"; 1 = *very easy*, 9 = *very difficult*) and *information unpleasantness* ("How pleasant or unpleasant do you expect the detailed information about yourself to be?"; 1 = *very unpleasant*, 9 = *very pleasant*).

Results and Discussion

Relationship Type
Participants who thought about close positive relationships listed family members, romantic partners, or friends. Those who thought about close negative relationships listed a variety of relationships, ranging from acquaintances and roommates to family members. None of the participants in the neutral-relationships condition listed a family member or current romantic partner, and many of them listed acquaintances or classmates and co-workers (Table 1).

Manipulation Checks
For each manipulation check, we conducted a *t* test against the scale midpoint (*M* = 5.00). Participants were displeased with their performance (*M* = 1.73), $t(109) = -27.03$, $p < .001$; considered the intelligence test difficult (*M* = 6.97), $t(109) = 16.82$, $p < .001$; and expected the liability-focused information to be unpleasant (*M* = 3.70), $t(109) = -8.15$, $p < .001$. Planned contrasts (close-positive-relationships condition vs. close-negative-relationships and neutral-relationships conditions combined) on each manipulation check produced null results.

Interest in Liability-Focused Information
Given that responses to the liability-focused questions had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$), we averaged them and conducted

TABLE 1

Relationship Types Listed (%) in Each Experimental Condition in Experiment 1

Relationship type	Condition		
	Close positive relationships	Close negative relationships	Neutral relationships
Family	30	9	—
Romantic partner	38	3	—
Friend	30	9	8
Acquaintance	—	3	37
Roommate	—	14	8
Classmate, co-worker	—	17	34
Ex-romantic partner	3	17	—
Former friend	—	17	3
Other (e.g., instructor, relation of a friend)	—	11	11

Note. Because of rounding errors, the percentages may not add up to 100.

planned contrasts on the resulting composite. We obtained effect size information by calculating $r_{\text{effect size}}$ in accordance to guidelines by Rosenthal, Rosnow, and Rubin (2000) and Furr (2004).

Our hypothesis was confirmed. Participants in the close-positive-relationships condition (*M* = 5.05) displayed stronger interest in liability-focused information than those in the close-negative-relationships (*M* = 4.01) and neutral-relationships (*M* = 4.21) conditions combined, $t(107) = 2.56$, $p < .05$, $r = .24$. Participants in the close-negative-relationships condition did not differ significantly from those in the neutral-relationships condition, $t(107) = -0.47$, $p < .64$, $r = .04$.

Affect for the Related Other
We posed two questions regarding affect for the related other. First, did affect vary as a function of relationship closeness? Second, did affect account for interest in liability-focused information? A coder unaware of our hypotheses rated the protocols of the relationship visualization task on evoked affect (1 = *very negative*, 2 = *negative*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *positive*, 5 = *very positive*). A second coder independently rated more than one third (36%) of the protocols. Given the high interrater reliability ($r = .93$), we used the first coder's ratings in our analyses.

Did affect vary as a function of relationship closeness? A planned contrast revealed that participants expressed warmer (i.e., more positive) affect for the close positive other (*M* = 5.00) than the close negative (*M* = 1.31) and neutral (*M* = 3.18) others combined, $t(104) = 22.80$, $p < .01$, $r = .82$. Further, participants expressed warmer affect for the neutral than the close negative partner, $t(104) = 13.15$, $p < .01$, $r = .45$.

Did affect account for interest in liability-focused information? Following the guidelines of Rosenthal et al. (2000), we created contrast codes for the two contrasts and entered the contrast codes and affect in a multiple regression model on interest in liability-focused information. The previously signif-

icant contrast between the close-positive-relationships condition and the close-negative-relationships and neutral-relationships conditions combined was reduced to nonsignificance, $t(103) = 1.28$, $p < .21$, $r = .13$. The contrast between the close-negative-relationships and neutral-relationships conditions remained nonsignificant, $t(103) = 0.70$, $p < .49$, $r = .07$. The covariate was not significant, $t(103) = -0.13$, $p < .90$, $r = -.01$. Note that in a separate regression analysis, affect did predict interest in liability-focused information, $t(105) = 2.67$, $p < .01$, $r = .25$. The lack of significance of affect in the multiple regression model may be due to the strong association between affect and experimental condition. In all, affect for the related other accounted for interest in liability-focused information.

Summary

Even in the face of unfavorable feedback, bringing to mind close positive relationships strengthened participants' interest in information about their weaknesses. This information was purported to be accurate and potentially useful. Nonetheless, it was perceived as threatening (i.e., unpleasant), which makes its paradoxical pursuit all the more impressive. Finally, affect for the related other emerged as an explanation for this finding.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that cognitive activation of close positive relationships engenders greater solicitation of accurate and potentially beneficial, yet threatening, information about personal liabilities than does cognitive activation of close negative and neutral relationships. An objective of Experiment 2 was to find out if this pattern is obtained when close positive relationships are compared not only with close negative relationships, but also with distant positive and distant negative relationships. Stated otherwise, are the relational features of closeness and positivity both required for the observed effect on liability-focused information to occur? Another objective of Experiment 2 was to test explanations for the hypothesized effect. Along with affect for the related other (as in Experiment 1), state self-esteem and mood were tested in Experiment 2. Does elevated self-esteem or good mood account for the increased interest in liability-focused information among participants who visualize a close positive relationship?

Participants took an ostensibly important intellectual skill test and thought of a relationship within one of four categories: close positive, close negative, distant positive, and distant negative. Following unfavorable feedback, participants indicated their interest in liability-focused information about their intelligence. We hypothesized that participants who had thought about a close positive relationship would display the strongest interest in liability-focused information. We tested this hypothesis by contrasting participants in this condition against participants in the remaining three conditions.

Method

Participants ($n = 95$) were tested on the "important intellectual skill of integrative orientation." The test actually was a 20-item difficult version of the Remote Associates Test (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1984). Each item consisted of three words, and participants were asked to generate a fourth that matched their meaning (e.g., cotton-bathtub-tonic; gin). Upon test completion (15 min), participants learned that they would soon receive test results along with a comprehensive and individualized profile of their integrative orientation skill.

Next, participants were requested to help with an ostensibly unrelated study (in actuality, the relationship visualization task). This task was different from that of Experiment 1 in two ways. First, there were four versions of the relationship visualization task, focusing on four kinds of relationships: close positive, close negative, distant positive, or distant negative. Second, participants in the two positive-relationships conditions listed how the person was supportive of them, whereas participants in the two negative-relationships conditions listed how the person was critical of them.

Participants then received feedback that they scored at the 41st percentile on the test and their performance was "below average." Following administration of the same performance-satisfaction manipulation check as in Experiment 1 (but with the scale ranging from 0 to 8), participants completed the 20-item Heatherton and Polivy (1991) state self-esteem scale ($0 = do\ not\ agree\ at\ all$, $8 = agree\ completely$). Next, they filled out a mood scale (Martin, Abend, Sedikides, & Green, 1997) consisting of six positive items (good, content, happy, calm, peaceful, pleased) and four negative items (anxious, tense, nervous, and down). Participants were asked to indicate how they were feeling in regard to each trait "right now" ($0 = does\ not\ apply\ at\ all$, $8 = applies\ very\ much$). We reverse-scored the negative items.

Subsequently, participants learned that a comprehensive profile of their integrative orientation skill had been compiled and they would have the opportunity to receive additional information that was a thorough analysis of their liabilities—an analysis that could improve their skill level. They proceeded to respond to four questions regarding their interest in this liability-focused information. Three questions were identical to those of Experiment 1, and the fourth one read, "How detailed would you like the liability-focused information to be?" ($0 = not\ at\ all$, $8 = very\ much$). Finally, participants completed the same test-difficulty and information-unpleasantness manipulation checks as in Experiment 1 (but with the scales ranging from 0 to 8).

Results and Discussion

Relationship Type

Participants who thought about close positive relationships listed exclusively family members, romantic partners, or friends. Participants who thought about close negative relationships listed a variety of relationship types, ranging from

TABLE 2

Relationship Types Listed (%) in Each Experimental Condition in Experiment 2

Relationship type	Condition			
	Close positive relationships	Close negative relationships	Distant positive relationships	Distant negative relationships
Family	45	15	—	—
Romantic partner	41	—	—	—
Friend	14	19	5	8
Acquaintance	—	15	32	29
Roommate	—	19	5	—
Classmate, co-worker	—	15	45	42
Ex-romantic partner	—	7	—	—
Former friend	—	7	9	13
Other (e.g., instructor, relation of a friend)	—	4	5	8

Note. Because of rounding errors, the percentages may not add up to 100.

acquaintances and roommates to family members. Finally, participants who thought about distant positive and distant negative relationships listed several relationship types (e.g., classmate or co-worker, acquaintance), but not family members and romantic partners (Table 2).

Manipulation Checks

For each manipulation check, we conducted a t test against the scale midpoint ($M = 4.00$). Participants were displeased with their performance ($M = 1.33$), $t(94) = -17.48$, $p < .001$; considered the intelligence test difficult ($M = 6.19$), $t(94) = 18.11$, $p < .001$; and expected the liability-focused information to be unpleasant ($M = 2.62$), $t(94) = -9.87$, $p < .001$. Planned contrasts (close-positive-relationships condition vs. remaining three conditions) on each manipulation check produced null results.

Interest in Liability-Focused Information

Given that responses to the four liability-focused questions showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$), we averaged them and carried planned contrasts on the composite. The results were consistent with our hypothesis. Participants in the close-positive-relationships condition ($M = 4.15$) expressed stronger interest in liability-focused information than participants in the remaining three conditions combined ($M_{\text{close negative}} = 3.25$, $M_{\text{distant positive}} = 3.02$, $M_{\text{distant negative}} = 2.91$), $t(90) = 2.25$, $p < .03$, $r = .23$. Tukey's comparisons revealed no significant differences among the close-negative-relationships, distant-positive-relationships, and distant-negative-relationships conditions.

State Self-Esteem

The state self-esteem scale has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). Mean scores are displayed in the first row of Table 3. The planned contrast revealed that participants in the close-positive-relationships condition did not report having higher state self-esteem than participants in the other three conditions combined, $t(90) = 0.04$, $p < .97$, $r = .02$. Tukey's comparisons revealed no significant differences among the means in the close-negative-relationships, distant-positive-relationships, and distant-negative-relationships conditions. The effect of close positive relationships on interest in liability-focused information is not attributable to temporarily elevated self-esteem.

Mood

The mood scale had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$). Mean scores are presented in the second row of Table 3. A planned

TABLE 3

State Self-Esteem, Mood, and Affect for Person Visualized as a Function of Experimental Condition in Experiment 2

Measure	Condition			
	Close positive relationships	Close negative relationships	Distant positive relationships	Distant negative relationships
State self-esteem	5.22	5.17	5.48	5.01
Mood	5.65	5.30	5.61	5.39
Affect	5.00	1.46	4.05	1.91

contrast revealed that participants in the close-positive-relationships condition did not report being in a better mood than participants in the other three conditions combined, $t(90) = 0.75, p < .46, r = .09$. Tukey's comparisons revealed no significant mean differences among the close-negative-relationships, distant-positive-relationships, and distant-negative-relationships conditions. The influence of close positive relationships on interest in liability-focused information is not attributable to better mood.

Affect for the Related Other

We tested whether affect differed as a function of relationship closeness and whether affect accounted for interest in liability-focused information. A coder unaware of the hypotheses rated all protocols on affect (1 = very negative, 2 = negative, 3 = neutral, 4 = positive, 5 = very positive), and a second coder independently rated 36% of the descriptions. Interrater reliability was high, $r = .87$, thus allowing us to use the first coder's ratings in the analyses. Means are shown in the third row of Table 3.

Did affect vary as a function of relationship closeness? In a conceptual replication of Experiment 1, a planned contrast revealed that thinking about a close positive other evoked warmer affect than thinking about the other three kinds of related others combined, $t(90) = 9.61, p < .01, r = .70$. Tukey's comparisons revealed that participants reported warmer affect for distant positive than distant negative or close negative others.

Did affect account for interest in liability-focused information? Again, we created contrast codes for the main contrast (i.e., close-positive-relationships condition vs. combination of the three other conditions) and two other orthogonal contrasts. We then entered the contrast codes and affect in a multiple regression model on interest in liability-focused information. The previously significant effect was attenuated to marginal significance, $t(86) = 1.82, p < .08, r = .19$. The covariate was not significant, $t(86) = -0.99, p < .33, r = -.11$. Affect did not predict interest in liability-focused information in a separate regression analysis either, $t(89) = 1.17, p < .25, r = .12$. In all, affect only partially accounted for interest in liability-focused information.

Summary

Cognitive activation of close positive relationships strengthened participants' interest in accurate and potentially beneficial, albeit threatening, information about their performance liabilities. This effect was not obtained when close negative, distant positive, or distant negative relationships were activated. Furthermore, the effect could not be accounted for by an increase in self-esteem or elevation of mood, but it was partially accounted for by warm affect for the related other.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Past research has shown that psychological resources (e.g., success experiences, positive mood, sense of control) can offset harmful consequences of failure feedback: Such resources increase the willingness to obtain accurate, if unfavorable, information about the self (Aspinwall, 1998; Trope et al., 2003). Additionally, past research has demonstrated that close relationships have resource potential, as they contribute to cognitive openness (Mikulincer & Arad, 1999) and exploration (Green & Campbell, 2000), while soothing both psychological (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) and physical (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001) health symptoms.

The present investigation brought these two literatures together. Assuming that close positive relationships convey a sense of warmth and acceptance, we hypothesized that thinking about close positive relationships would increase receptivity to accurate but unpleasant information about performance weaknesses in the face of immediate prior failure. Close positive relationships buffer the self to the point where accurate and potentially beneficial information about one's liabilities will be considered worth soliciting despite the clear and present threat to the self.

The evidence was consistent with the hypothesis. In Experiment 1, participants who brought to mind a close positive (as opposed to close negative or neutral) relationship indicated stronger interest in additional information about a newly discovered weakness. In Experiment 2, participants who brought to mind a close positive (as opposed to close negative, distant positive, or distant negative) relationship expressed the strongest interest in information about a newly discovered weakness. Buffered by thoughts of a close positive relationship, participants overcame a considerable amount of self-threat in their quest for potentially useful information.

What are the mechanisms through which close positive relationships bolster the self? Experiment 2 ruled out elevated state self-esteem and good mood as explanatory mechanisms. However, warm affect for the related other emerged as a potential explanation in both experiments. What are the physiological correlates of this mechanism? One hypothesis is that a surge in oxytocin levels is involved (Taylor et al., 2000). This hypothesis needs to be tested in conjunction with possible gender differences (Broadwell & Light, 1999; Taylor, 2002). Women may experience a higher surge in oxytocin level than men when visualizing a close positive other.

Our investigation opens up additional empirical avenues. Along with warm affect for the related other, do mechanisms such as feeling unconditionally accepted by the partner or experiencing the partner as part of one's self play a role in the solicitation of liability-focused feedback? What type of close positive relationship (e.g., romantic partner, friend, family member) constitutes the most effective self-bolstering mechanism? Does relationship-induced self-bolstering influence other

performance-related variables such as task persistence, intrinsic motivation, and creativity? Finally, what are some crucial individual differences in the use of close positive relationships as a resource? Possible candidates are self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998), attachment style (secure, avoidant, dismissive; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), and incremental versus entity theorizing (Dweck, 1999).

In conclusion, the present research has established another way in which self-evaluations (i.e., feedback preferences) are shaped by close relationships. The research extended the growing literature on relationships-as-resource by showing that cognitive activation of close positive relationships strengthens interest in information about one's newly discovered liabilities. In the safety and comfort of close positive relationships, individuals venture even to seemingly harsh territory—to territory where diagnostic but hurtful information may lie.

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