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# The Relationship Between Self-Esteem, Ambivalence, and Relationship Outcomes within Romantic Partnerships

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The College of Wooster

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem, Ambivalence, and Relationship Outcomes within  
Romantic Partnerships

by

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of Independent Study Thesis Research

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### Abstract

The current study analyzes self-esteem and the apparent mood of one's partner as predictors of perceived responsibility, level of felt rejection, and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. The study hypothesizes that ambivalence will act as a moderating variable between self-esteem and romantic relationship outcomes. Previous research on the topic suggests that self-esteem is associated with how participants react to their romantic partner when they are in a specific mood. The current study will be one of the first to examine how ambivalence affects self-esteem's effect on romantic relationships. The results replicate previous research, showing that self-esteem interacts with partner's mood to predict perceived responsibility. Results also show that level of rejection and relationship satisfaction are associated with self-esteem. Ambivalence was not a significant moderator of these effects. Additionally, self-concept clarity was a significant predictor of how responsible participants felt when their romantic partner was in a certain mood.

*Keywords:* ambivalence, romantic relationships, self-esteem, self-concept clarity, responsibility, rejection, satisfaction

### **Introduction**

Attitudes are not always as clear-cut as one might think. While there are certainly instances where people have strong opinions, views, and perceptions that carry out in one specific direction, sometimes attitudes are more mixed. This phenomenon can be defined as attitudinal ambivalence, which is when people have co-occurring positive and negative attitudes towards a certain entity, person, or object (Conner & Armitage, 2008).

Attitudinal ambivalence can occur in a vast variety of different situations. One person might love the effects of alcohol when going out to a party, yet dread the consequences of having drunk too much of it the next morning. Another person might hate the taste of foods such as broccoli and asparagus, yet recognize the nutritional and weight loss benefits such foods bring about. A person might agree with a political candidate's views and stances on social issues, yet completely disagree with the candidate's economic policies. These examples indicate the manifestation of ambivalent attitudes. The object being evaluated is neither viewed as completely positive nor completely negative. Rather, both attitudes are present at the same time, yet independent from one and other (Conner & Armitage, 2008). The attitudes being presented lack a straightforward and clear answer towards how one feels about a certain entity. They imply that one might have conflicting evaluations towards a specific attitude object. Attitudinal ambivalence suggests that some people do not view objects with such strong and unhindered confidence. Instead, some people are not positive as to whether they interpret an object as purely good or purely bad (Conner & Armitage, 2008).

### **Objective vs. Subjective Ambivalence**

Several approaches to ambivalence tend to exist in psychology (Gardner, 1987; Wegner, Downing, Krosnick, & Petty, 1995; Conner & Armitage, 2008; Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider,

2015; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). These definitions are clearly expressed within the two forms of ambivalence generally referred to as objective and subjective ambivalence.

Objective ambivalence, or potential ambivalence, is when an attitude towards an object contains both positive and negative aspects. Objective ambivalence is concerned with the structure of ambivalence (DeMarree, Petty, & Briñol, 2007). When objective ambivalence is looked at within research studies, generally positive and negative attitudes are measured separately and independently of one another (Conner & Armitage, 2008). Various mathematical approaches have been identified to indicate how much conflict there is between these separate ratings of positivity and negativity (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Oftentimes, objective ambivalence is associated with the uncomfortable state of feeling conflicted, which is often referred to as subjective ambivalence (Priester & Petty, 1996).

Subjective ambivalence, or felt ambivalence, is the feeling of psychological conflict and can generally be defined as an uncomfortable state of feeling conflicted about a topic or an issue (see DeMarree et al., 2007). When someone says they feel “torn” or “conflicted” about a decision or an issue, they are expressing subjective ambivalence. When analyzing subjective ambivalence within research studies, this phenomenon is generally measured by asking participants how conflicted, mixed, and undecided they feel about their attitudes (DeMarree, Petty, & Briñol, 2007). Previous literature suggests that people feel a great deal of discomfort when their attitudes are ambivalent—especially when they are about to commit to a position on an issue (van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & De Liver, 2009). The level of conflict surrounding a certain attitude object, or the higher level of subjective ambivalence that is present, is shown to cause a greater level of uneasiness and agitation within people. The greater level of subjective ambivalence a person feels, the more motivated they will be to reduce ambivalence, which in

turn can lead ambivalent individuals to be more susceptible to attitude changes (DeMaree et al., 2007).

### **Ambivalence and Attitude Strength**

Strong attitudes can be defined as attitudes that are durable and impactful (Wegener et al., 1995). When an attitude is strong in nature, the evaluations one will make become better predictors of behavior and will be less susceptible to change. Ambivalence is a common indication of attitude change (Conner & Armitage, 2008). When people's attitudes are less ambivalent, they are stronger and more durable. However, when ambivalence levels are high, attitudes become more subject to change (Conner & Armitage, 2008).

**Behaviors.** Attitude strength is an important idea to examine because the more strength an attitude has, the more correlated these attitudes are with related behaviors (Glasman & Albarracin, 2006; Myers, 1999). For example, if a person is a strong proponent for the benefits of exercise, it is likely that they participate in exercising behaviors. The relationship between attitudes and behaviors is complex. When research first began testing the attitude-behavior relationship, it was generally believed that attitudes were predictive of behaviors. However, mounting evidence began to suggest that this might not be the case. In fact, some claimed that the correlation between attitudes and behaviors generally tended to be extremely weak (Wicker, 1969). Despite the weak correlation, this does not imply that attitudes and behaviors are unrelated. The Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that there is, in fact, a relationship between attitudes and intention to perform a behavior, which is mediated by social norms, perceived behavioral control, and attitudes towards a specific behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Strong attitudes towards a behavior are the strongest predictor of intention to perform a behavior. Other variables such as certainty and accessibility are useful in improving the attitude-behavior

correlation (DeMarree et al., 2007). More relevant to the present research, ambivalence plays a similar role in shaping attitude-behavior consistency (van Hareveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015).

Those who report higher levels of ambivalence generally have weaker attitude-behavior relationships compared to individuals with low levels of ambivalence. For example, ambivalence has an effect on one's ability to stick to a strict diet (Conner, Sparks, Povey, James, Shepherd, & Armitage, 2002). Participants were assigned to engage in low-fat diet behaviors, (i.e., consume 5 portions of fruits and vegetables a day). Consistent with ambivalence as an indicator of weak attitudes, participants who had higher ambivalent attitudes towards eating a healthy diet had weak correlations between their attitudes and behaviors, compared to those low in ambivalence. The participants with attitudinal ambivalence struggled to follow the low-fat diet behaviors, whereas participants who were univalent were more likely to follow the low-fat diet behaviors. People with higher levels of ambivalence had a harder time following through with the diet behaviors, as they lacked strong attitudes towards healthy eating behaviors they were performing. Just as people are more interested and involved in behaviors and attitudes that are of personal relevance to them, people struggle to follow through on behaviors they do not have a strong attitude towards (Conner et al., 2002). Participants with more positive attitudes towards healthy eating behaviors were more inclined to follow through on sticking to their diet. These implications suggest that strong attitudes, due to their sturdy nature, are more likely to predict behaviors than weaker attitudes.

Importantly these effects are not restricted to healthy eating behaviors. Ambivalence weakens attitude-behavior correlations for other behaviors like smoking. In one study, participants with ambivalent attitudes towards smoking were asked to hold and view a cigarette, while an fMRI scan was done to examine the reward-related regions of their brains. Results

indicate that the amount of ambivalence towards smoking is correlated with brain activity in regions linked to smoking cue reactivity (Wilson, Creswell, Sayette, & Fiez, 2013). This data suggests that having ambivalent attitudes can affect the regions of one's brain, which are linked to behavior. These studies suggest that individuals' ambivalence levels are reflected throughout their behaviors and actions, in that participants with high levels of ambivalence show ambivalence within their behaviors (Conner et al., 2002).

**Pliability.** Pliability is a key feature of attitude strength, as it refers to the stability and consistency of an attitude over time (DeMaree, Morrison, Wheeler, & Petty, 2011). When examining the pliability of attitudes, researchers often examine what causes an attitude to remain the same over time and in response to direct persuasion. Previous research suggests that there is a direct relationship between ambivalence and the pliability of an attitude, in that those with more ambivalent attitudes tend to be more susceptible to attitude changes (DeMaree et al., 2011, Clarkson et al., 2008, Zemborain & Johar, 2006, MacDonald & Zanna, 1998).

In a challenge to the crystallization hypothesis, research suggested that greater attitude certainty leads to stronger correlations between attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and judgments. In three experiments the researchers analyzed the relationship between attitude pliability in regards to ambivalent and univalent attitudes. The research suggests that participants who were higher in ambivalence had weaker attitudes than participants with univalent attitudes (Clarkson et al., 2008). Similarly, ambivalence and certainty moderate each other's relationship to attitude stability, in that higher levels of certainty were related to attitude stability over time, as ambivalence decreased. Likewise, higher levels of ambivalence were associated with less attitude stability over time, as certainty increased (Luttrell, Petty, & Briñol, 2016).

Ambivalent attitudes are thus highly pliable. People who hold ambivalent attitudes are much more likely to be persuaded to change or alter their perceptions and views (DeMaree et al., 2011). When analyzing the effectiveness of political candidates, for example, people with more ambivalent attitudes, were more easily persuaded and influenced by both sources that were high and low in reliability (Zembarain & Johar, 2006). Ambivalent individuals were influenced in a certain direction regardless of how reliable the sources presented to them were. Contrastingly, participants who were low in ambivalence double-checked the less reliable sources. These individuals were able to differentiate between the sources and were not as influenced by low-reliability sources. These findings suggest that people with high levels of ambivalence are more easily influenced than those who report low levels of ambivalence. The study also implies that highly ambivalent individuals are more easily persuaded as they encode and accept information without thoroughly examining the issue at hand. Thus individuals who are more ambivalent chose to accept and be influenced by information more readily than their less ambivalent counterparts (Zembarain & Johar, 2006).

The study of ambivalence and pliability can be applied in many different contexts. One example of this is through the examination of the relationship between cross-dimensional ambivalence and attitudes towards feminists (MacDonald & Zanna, 1998). In this context, cross-dimensional ambivalence referred to the idea that a person can feel positively about an attitude object on one dimension, yet feel negatively about it on another. Men in the study felt higher levels of ambivalence towards feminists than they did traditional women. Specifically, males high in ambivalence rated feminists as positive when it came to aspects such as admiration, but rated the same individuals negatively when it came to affection. While they are able to recognize positive aspects within these individuals, there are other characteristics, which they regard more

negatively. These mixed attitudes clearly represent the ambivalent attitudes that the men in this study felt towards feminist women.

In a second study, ambivalent males who received a positive prime about feminists were more likely to suggest hiring these individuals and reported higher levels of likeability for these women. However, when these ambivalent males received a negative prime about feminists, they tended to not want to hire these women and considered them to be unfavorable. Lastly, the study reported the males who did not have ambivalent attitudes towards women were unaffected by the prime (MacDonald & Zanna, 1998). The findings suggest that those who are more ambivalent in their attitudes are more susceptible to changing their opinions and perceptions even on subtle features of the environment.

Studying the relationship between ambivalence and pliability is vastly important as it provides insight into how and why attitudes change over time. Research in this area tends to suggest that higher levels of attitudinal ambivalence increase one's chances of having more flexible attitudes, while those with low levels of ambivalence tend to have more consistent attitudes over time. It is important to note that the ambivalence-pliability effect remains true for a variety of different attitudes (Bell & Esses, 1997; DeMarree et al., 2011; Pillaud, Cavazza, Butera, 2013, Priester & Petty, 1996; van Hareveld et al., 2015; Zemborain & Johar, 2007).

**Context.** Although plenty of research has shown how ambivalent attitudes are especially susceptible to persuasion (DeMaree et al., 2011; Zemborain & Johar, 2007), they can also change even without any direct attempts at persuasion. Instead, a simple feature of the environment can affect people's evaluations when their attitudes are relatively ambivalent. Consider the example of fried food. For many, fried food might elicit an ambivalent response, in that people like the taste yet recognize it is a poor food choice. In an environment where they are conscious of their

health goals, such as being at the gym, or before weighing themselves, their attitudes towards fried foods might be more negative. However, when the environment reminds them of their hunger (i.e. being in a restaurant) their opinions towards the food might become more positive.

One contextual factor, which can affect ambivalent attitudes, is the opinions of other people. Due to the conflicting nature of attitudinal ambivalence, people generally think that it is bad to be ambivalent. After all, research on ambivalence suggests that having ambivalent attitudes can lead to more flip-flopping and failure to act on one's opinions—not to mention a feeling of discomfort (Priester & Petty, 1996; van Hareveld et al., 2015). These are often perceived as negative consequences of ambivalence. While these have generally been regarded as characteristics that can have potentially harmful and dangerous consequences, new research suggests that ambivalence might actually be adaptive.

Studies that consider the social and adaptive value of ambivalence suggest that it can be useful to be ambivalent (Pillaud et al., 2013). The research suggests that attitudinal ambivalence is controllable and has positive social value. For example, people with high levels of ambivalence towards controversial topics, such as the debate over GMOs, might be more positively received than those with univalent attitudes. People high in ambivalence were more likely to see both the positive benefits of GMOs as well as the negative consequences of GMOs. Rather than taking a specific stance on the issue, participants exercised their ambivalence—recognizing that there might be a social value in not being strongly opinionated in only one direction. By being able to express both pro-GMO and anti-GMO opinions, ambivalent individuals might be more likely to get along with others who feel positively about the issue and with others who feel negatively about it (Pillaud et al., 2013).

In regards to control, people high in ambivalence are better able to adapt to a univalent individual's perspective when it comes to a controversial issue. Using the example of GMOs, when someone high in ambivalence encounters a pro-GMO individual, he or she is able to control the way in which they view the issue. Rather than focusing on the negative aspects they see about GMOs, ambivalent people can focus on positive aspects of GMOs, making them better able to relate to the pro-GMO individual (Pillaud et al., 2013). These findings are vital as they suggest that when it comes to issues that are not purely consensual and agreed upon, people are able to alter and adjust their points of view. Ambivalence can thus be viewed as having adaptive value, as it allows people to use their mixed opinions towards an attitude to better relate to and understand the opinions of those with univalent attitudes in either direction. Ambivalence can thus be viewed as having positive social value, in that it helps people fit into groups and get along with people socially. These results also suggest that participants who are ambivalent about controversial issues present themselves more positively than people who are univalent, as ambivalent individuals are able to get along with people on either side of a controversial issue (Pillaud et al., 2013).

Finally, primes are an important environmental cue to examine when looking at the study of ambivalence. Primes are stimuli in the environment (processed consciously or unconsciously) that activate particular thoughts, shaping the way people respond to another stimulus (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). For example, if a sad song is playing on the radio, a person's mood may shift to reflect the mood of the song, which can then affect the person's evaluation of something completely different. In regards to ambivalence, primes have strong effects on those with preexisting conflicting attitudes. Priming influences the direction of ambivalent individuals' attitudes. When positive and negative primes were presented prior to seeing information about

either Native Americans or Canadian Americans, those who were ambivalent towards Native Americans had different attitude responses towards Native Americans than they did towards Canadian Americans. Specifically, when individuals who were ambivalent towards Native Americans were primed with a positive stimulus, their attitudes towards Native Americans were significantly more favorable than those primed with a negative stimulus (Bell & Esses, 1997). There were no differences between the positive and negative prime amongst individuals who were non-ambivalent towards Native Americans. Ambivalent individuals who received primes were persuaded by the message they received, suggesting that primes can play an important role in the ways in which an ambivalent person chooses to approach an issue.

In broader terms, if a prime presents an attitude object in a positive light an individual might be more likely to view this object with positivity. Likewise, a negative prime would likely cause an individual, who is already ambivalent, to view the attitude with greater negativity. In other words, ambivalent attitudes mean that the person is capable of seeing the topic as good *or* bad, and subtle primes can thus nudge those people toward focusing on one or the other preexisting opinion. Univalent attitudes, however, mean that the person cannot see the topic as anything other than her overall attitude, so no amount of priming can push them to accept the other side. Further, these context effects tend to be larger when a person feels that the issue is especially important (Tourangeau, Rasinski, Bradburn, & D'Andrade, 1989). These effects suggest that the way in which an issue is presented and the level of ambivalence a person has towards this issue can affect the way that people perceive issues.

### **Self-Esteem and Ambivalence**

The existing research on ambivalence suggests that an attitude can be composed of both positive and negative reactions. Although prior research on ambivalence has considered its

implications for political attitudes, social issues, health behaviors, and interpersonal attitudes, it can also be applied to people's attitudes about themselves—namely, self-esteem. In order to clearly understand the relationship that is present between ambivalence and self-esteem, it is important to understand a few conceptual definitions relating to self-esteem.

The concept of self-esteem in psychology is generally viewed in terms of a person's sense of self-worth or value. According to one definition of self-esteem, the concept is a human necessity, which often automatically comes about based on a person's thoughts, feelings, actions, and behaviors (Braden, 1969). It is generally believed that self-esteem comes from within a person's consciousness and beliefs yet can be influenced by outside factors.

There are many different types of self-esteem, but the two most popularly discussed are global self-esteem and specific self-esteem. Global self-esteem refers to the "individual's positive or negative attitude towards themselves as a totality" (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995, pg. 141)." Specific self-esteem, on the other hand, refers to specific abilities, aptitudes, or traits that a person has, such as academic abilities or aesthetic qualities, on which people base judgments of themselves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). While global self-esteem is much more commonly examined, it is important to take into account the small aspects or qualities (specific) which, influence the way a person, values or views themselves.

Generally, people tend to vary along a continuum of low self-esteem to high self-esteem. Low self-esteem is when a person has low self-worth and attributes little value to themselves, whereas high self-esteem is characterized by feelings of high self-worth and value. Studies generally tend to focus on the harmful effects of low self-esteem. In fact, it is generally agreed within psychology that people with low self-esteem tend to have more dangerous psychological and health outcomes (Battle, 1978; Guillon, Crocq, & Bailey, 2003; Taylor & Pilar, 1992). Low

self-esteem tends to be correlated with psychological disorders. In one outpatient treatment center, all 957 psychiatric patients studied suffered from some form of low self-esteem. Specifically, those with co-occurring disorders were at the greatest risk for low self-esteem (Silverstone & Salsali, 2003).

Despite this research, there is also research that highlights the dangers of having too much self-esteem. Having high self-esteem is generally portrayed in the media as being a positive attribute, as it is less correlated with symptoms of depressions and other psychological disorders (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Browne, & Correll, 2003). New research, however, suggests that there are different forms of self-esteem, which can predict how stable or defensive the person can be (Jordan et al., 2003). Specifically, the research suggests that there are two different types of high self-esteem. Secure high self-esteem refers to the idea that a person is confident in themselves and is well adjusted. These individuals tend to be what the media refers to when they discuss the positive attributes of high self-esteem. Defensive self-esteem, on the other hand, may be utilized to describe someone who comes across as vain, arrogant, or narcissistic.

Recent approaches to self-esteem also point to the difference between implicit and explicit self-esteem (Jordan et al., 2003). Explicit self-esteem refers to the conscious evaluations a person makes about their selves, whereas implicit self-esteem refers to unconscious evaluations of the self. Defensive self-esteem is believed to be associated with unconscious, or implicit attitudinal beliefs, that a high self-esteem individual does not realize they have about themselves. Defensive self-esteem is present in individuals with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem—thus, it is a form of ambivalence about oneself. Defensive self-esteem individuals possessed the greatest levels of narcissism (Jordan et al., 2003). While defensive high self-esteem may not always have dangerous effects, it can lead to increased instances of violence and aggression—

specifically, rape, partner abuse, and murder, as instances where high self-esteem can be dangerous (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

While not talked about as often, ambivalent self-esteem refers to the idea that an individual consciously feels both positively and negatively about himself or herself and recognizes that both aspects can occur at the same time. Just as low and high self-esteem can be viewed as having dangerous qualities, ambivalent self-esteem comes with its own set of positives and negatives.

It is important to examine the factors that might play a role in one developing ambivalent self-esteem. One important factor to consider is the influence of culture. Various cultures have differing opinions on ambivalence. For example, individuals from East Asian countries were more likely to report higher levels of ambivalence when it came to their perceptions of themselves. These individuals had more mixed or conflicting attitudes about themselves than their Western counterparts (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang & Hou, 2010). Interestingly previous research on the topic suggests that East Asian individuals live in a more dialectical society, meaning they live in a society where psychological contradictions are more accepted and acknowledged. Contrastingly, Western societies are more inclined to be uncomfortable and conflicted when psychological contradictions are present (Spencer-Rodgers, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, et al., 2010). The contrasting nature of these cultures is interesting to observe, as they illustrate how different parts of the world think about ambivalence, especially in regard to the self. While more Western countries might look at ambivalent attitudes as entirely negative, countries in East Asia have learned to accept these attitudes and recognize them not as flaws, but merely a part of life. Cultural attitudes towards ambivalence are likely to play a role in the development of ambivalent self-esteem. Since Western societies do not consider ambivalence to

be as acceptable a concept as Eastern countries, they are likely less inclined to admit to ambivalent attitudes towards the self. They are also more likely to consider themselves to be more univalent in their self-esteem. In comparison, Eastern countries acceptance towards ambivalence might lead to the development of ambivalent self-esteem. Since Eastern countries consider these attitudes to be more normal, it is also likely that they are less troubled by their ambivalent self-esteem than people from Western societies.

Having ambivalent self-esteem, however, has its own set of consequences, including susceptibility to change. Manipulating ambivalence is a good way of studying how stable people's attitudes are towards themselves. High levels of ambivalence decrease the level of confidence people feel about their self-esteem attitudes. Specifically, as self-ambivalence levels became higher, participants became less confident in their attitudes about themselves. Although levels of ambivalence were manipulated in a manner in which the participants were unaware, their self-esteem became more susceptible to change as ambivalence levels increased (DeMarree et al., 2011).

### **Ambivalent Self-Esteem and Relationships**

The research currently available on relationship satisfaction suggests that there are a great many factors that influence how happy a person is within their romantic relationship. When a person is in a close relationship such as marriage or domestic partnership, they tend to report higher levels of overall well-being than those not in relationships (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Older adults who are married or in a long-term relationship tend to be positively impacted by these relationships and have better overall health and life expectancy than their single counterparts (Schone & Weinick, 1998; Kaplan & Kronick, 2006). The benefits of a positive romantic relationship are extremely impactful in a person's life. Despite this, relationship

satisfaction is often subject to changes, with different factors impacting how positively or negatively one views his or her relationship. In this paper, I will focus primarily on how impactful self-esteem is on relationship satisfaction.

In general, the more people feel positively about themselves, the more likely they will feel positively about the relationship they are in. Low self-esteem individuals are more likely to vastly underestimate how positively their partners viewed them (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). Due to this misconception individuals with low self-esteem tend to rate their partners lower and had lower overall levels of satisfaction within their relationship. The negative perceptions they have towards themselves cause these participants to project their insecurities and negative attitudes upon their partners. Even more, low self-esteem participants' self-handicapping and relationship weaknesses only tend to get worse over time. On the other hand, high self-esteem individuals have the opposite effects (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Growing areas of research suggest that self-esteem may be a vital factor in the development of relationship satisfaction (Erol & Orth, 2013, Orth, Robins, & Widamann, 2012). Initial levels of self-esteem predict how satisfied couples are with their romantic partner's over time. When self-esteem was altered or changed as time went on, partner's satisfaction levels were subject to change as well (Erol & Orth, 2014). These implications suggest that self-esteem may play a vital role in the satisfaction of romantic couples. It also suggests that changes in self-esteem have the ability to either negatively or positively affect romantic partners levels of happiness within their relationship.

If self-esteem does play such an important role in relationship satisfaction, it is necessary to think about how ambivalent self-esteem might impact a romantic partnership. As previously mentioned, higher ambivalence is often associated with less attitude stability across contexts

(Luttrell et al., 2016). Thus, feeling high levels of *self*-ambivalence might lead an individual to second-guess their initial feelings towards their romantic partner. That is, having ambivalent self-esteem may decrease a person's certainty in their romantic relationship and lead to less attitude stability towards their romantic partner. Research suggests that ambivalence can affect the extent to which a person is willing to forgive their romantic partner, a factor that is helpful in analyzing relationship outcomes. Specifically, people who had higher levels of attitudinal ambivalence towards their partner found it more difficult to forgive their spouse for marital transgressions and thought about the transgression more often (Kachadourian, 2005). These findings are important as they imply that in the context of romantic relationships, people who feel both positively and negatively about their partners are more likely to focus on the negative aspects of their partners when they commit a transgression. Specifically, it suggests that people who have higher levels of ambivalence towards their partner might be more inclined to view their romantic relationships more skeptically and have a harder time moving past difficult situations.

Another important variable that is similar to self-ambivalence, and might be important in the context of romantic relationships, is self-concept clarity (SCC; Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). SCC is a concept that deals with the ways in which people organize their beliefs about themselves. Specifically, it considers how clearly and confidently people feel about their self-beliefs and self-views. It also looks at how internally consistent and stable these views about themselves remain over time (Guerrettaz & Arkin, 2016, Campbell et al., 1996). SCC directly relates to self-esteem and was designed in order to help researchers understand the difference in the ways high and low self-esteem individuals view themselves. Typically, people with high self-esteem have higher SCC, while people with low self-esteem have lower SCC (DeMarree & Rios Morrison, 2012). In accordance with relationships, SCC positively correlates with how satisfied

people are in the quality of their romantic relationships and how committed they are to their partner. Specifically, those with higher SCC reported higher relationship quality and more commitment than those with low SCC (Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010). These effects are important as they suggest that SCC, above and beyond self-esteem, is an important predictor of how people view their romantic relationships. SCC is also related to attitudinal ambivalence. The clarity with which people view themselves is an important indicator of the kinds of attitudes they might hold about themselves (DeMarree & Rios, 2014). Specifically, the level of clarity a person feels about their self-beliefs and self-views will affect whether this person is univalent or ambivalent in their attitudes towards themselves. Additionally, many of the items on the SCC scale can actually be utilized to measure a person's subjective ambivalence, as they assess the amount of conflict within people's attitudes (DeMarree & Rios, 2014).

To better understand self-esteem's role in relationships, it is important to focus on individual events and perceptions that might shape overall relationship satisfaction. One such experience that appears relevant to self-ambivalence is whether a person feels responsible for their partners' emotional states. In fact, some research offers a first glimpse at this experience. Bellavia and Murray (2003) looked at the relationship between self-esteem and a person's reaction to their romantic partner's mood. Romantic partner's moods were manipulated in order to analyze the effects that self-esteem played on participant's reactions to their partners. The research presented participants with one of four specific scenarios that include their romantic partner's emotions. The participants were asked to read a scenario which had either their partner in a positive mood with a known cause for that mood, a positive mood with an ambiguous cause, a negative mood with a known cause for the mood, or a negative mood with an ambiguous cause. Participants were randomly assigned to two of the scenarios and asked to answer a series of

questions about their reactions. Specifically, self-esteem was examined to analyze participants perceived responsibility for their partner's mood and the level of rejection they felt from their partner (Bellavia & Murray, 2003).

Participants who were asked to picture the negative ambiguous scenario were more likely to blame themselves for their partners' mood when they had relatively low self-esteem. However, participants with higher self-esteem were more likely to suppose that their partners' bad mood was caused by something other than themselves. The low self-esteem participants, who perceived responsibility for their partners' bad moods, in turn, felt a greater level of rejection from their partners, compared to individuals with higher self-esteem. When examining the scenario with a positive mood and an ambiguous cause, there was no significant difference between the low self-esteem and high self-esteem individuals in terms of perceived responsibility for partner's mood (Bellavia & Murray, 2003).

### **Current Research**

The current study aims to replicate Bellavia and Murray (2003) and extend its results by considering the additional influence of self-ambivalence. This required several key changes to their original procedure. First, rather than focusing on all four scenarios, this study will only examine positive and negative moods with ambiguous causes. These scenarios were chosen, as they are the scenarios that are most open to interpretation by individuals who are prepared to view themselves as either positive or negative as a result of their ambivalence. The study aims to manipulate romantic partners' moods in order to see if type of self-esteem plays a role in the ways in which they react to their partners'.

Next, the study will analyze participants' responses to their romantic partners' moods with the added variable of ambivalence. The study will examine how ambivalent attitudes about

the self affect participants' perceived responsibility and level of rejection felt towards their partner. Ambivalent self-esteem is important to take into account, as it might be accountable for some of the overall self-esteem results within Bellavia & Murray's (2003) study. A person with ambivalent self-esteem sees himself as both good *and* bad. While they might view certain aspects of themselves as positive, they may also recognize that other aspects of themselves are negative. Specifically, I suggest that some of the results in Bellavia and Murray's (2003) study may be due not to low self-esteem, as previously suggested, but by ambivalent self-esteem. That is, just as ambivalence toward fried foods means the person is able to focus on the positives versus the negatives in different scenarios, *self*-ambivalence means the person is able to focus on his or her positive versus negative qualities in different scenarios. Thus, regardless of whether one's partner is in a positive or negative mood, someone with self-ambivalence is likely to see himself as at least partially responsible for the mood. The same would be less likely for someone with only a positive or negative self-view, as he or she would be less impacted by other potential reasons for the mood.

This study will also examine how other factors may be impacted by self-esteem by looking at relationship satisfaction alongside perceived responsibility and level of rejection (Hendrick, 1988). Adding this variable to the study will give us a clearer idea of how self-esteem impacts relationships and more broadly the way people interpret their romantic partner's moods. Similarly, this study will measure self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996), which examines how confidently people feel in their beliefs about themselves, as an exploratory variable.

The first hypothesis of this study is that self-esteem and partner's mood will be significant predictors of perceived responsibility, level of rejection, and relationship satisfaction. Some of these results were demonstrated within the original Bellavia and Murray (2003) study,

and I predict they will be replicated within my study, with additional effects on relationship satisfaction.

The second hypothesis is that ambivalence will moderate the effects of self-esteem and partner's mood on perceived responsibility, level of rejection, and relationship satisfaction. In this, I predict that in the positive mood scenario, participants with univalent low self-esteem will not take any credit for their partner's mood, whereas low self-esteem individuals with ambivalence will rate themselves as slightly more responsible for their partner's mood. These effects will be due to the positive mood scenario priming positive aspects about themselves. Thus, low self-esteem ambivalent participants will take on slightly more responsibility for their partner's positive mood, feel less rejected, and have higher relationship satisfaction than their univalent counterparts.

Reflecting on the positive mood scenario, I hypothesize that participants with univalent and ambivalent high self-esteem will consider themselves to be the most responsible for their partner's positive mood, have the least levels of felt rejection, and have high relationship satisfaction. Ambivalence will not alter high self-esteem participant's perceptions of relationship outcomes when considering this partner's mood, as the condition only primed positive aspects of individuals. My study proposes that Bellavia and Murray's (2003) finding that low self-esteem and high self-esteem individuals did not differ significantly in perceived responsibility when it came to the positive mood scenario is actually a result of ambivalent low self-esteem. In this, I mean that low self-esteem individuals with ambivalence are more similar to high self-esteem individuals when it comes to perceived responsibility.

When looking at the negative mood, I hypothesize that participants with low self-esteem will perceive themselves to be more responsible for their partner's mood, the most rejected by

their partner's, and the least satisfied in their relationships regardless of ambivalence's influence. These effects are due to the partner's negative mood priming only negative self-attitudes in those who generally already feel negatively about themselves.

My study suggests that when considering the negative mood scenario, participants with univalent high self-esteem will perceive themselves to be less responsible for partner's moods, feel less rejected, and will have higher relationship satisfaction than ambivalent high self-esteem participants. The negative mood scenario will prime participants with ambivalent high self-esteem, causing them to focus more on the negative qualities they possess. In turn, these participants will feel their relationship outcomes are less positive than those with univalent high self-esteem.

Finally, this study tests the exploratory hypothesis that SCC and partner's mood work together to predict perceived responsibility, level of rejection, and relationship satisfaction. I predict that SCC will work almost identically to self-esteem when it comes to predicting perceived responsibility, level of rejection, and relationship satisfaction.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N=161$ ) were workers recruited through the Amazon Mechanical Turk website. All participants were from the United States of America. Participants were eighteen years of age and older ( $M = 35.34$ ,  $SD = 10.83$ , range = 20-66). 54.7 % were males and 45.3 % were females. Each participant who took part in the study was compensated with fifty cents.

## Procedure

Participants were first asked to complete a series of questions, which assessed their self-esteem, the strength of their self-esteem<sup>1</sup>, and their self-concept clarity. Participants were randomly assigned to either the positive mood scenario or the negative mood scenario and asked to vividly imagine themselves in the situation with their romantic partner. After reading the scenarios, participants were asked to complete another series of questions related to how the survey made them feel and react, as well as demographic questions. See Appendix A for full question wording for all measured variables.

## Independent Variables

**Self-Esteem.** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was used to measure levels of self-worth and value (e.g., “On the whole, I am generally satisfied with myself” and “I take a positive attitude toward myself”). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the self-esteem questions using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*). The 10 self-esteem questions showed good internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and were averaged together to form a self-esteem inventory.

**Ambivalence.** In order to examine self-ambivalence, we used the same procedures as DeMarree et al. (2011). Participants rated three questions (“To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward yourself one-sided or mixed?” “How certain are you of your thoughts and feelings toward yourself?” and “To what extent is your reaction towards yourself confused?”) on 10-point scales ranging from 1 (*Not at all conflicted/confused/completely one-sided*) to 9 (*Extremely conflicted/confused/mixed*). The questions had high consistency ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and were thus averaged to form an index of self-ambivalence.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a technical error for measuring objective ambivalence. Due to this error, my study relied on subjective ambivalence. Previous research has shown that there is a strong correlation between subjective ambivalence and objective ambivalence (e.g., Priester & Petty, 1996) so I did not expect that my results would differ significantly.

**Self-Concept Clarity Scale.** The Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996) measured how clearly a participant felt about their opinions towards themselves (e.g., “I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality” and “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.”). The study used the full-scale model and thus measures all three aspects covered by the scale. These include the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable (Campbell et al., 1996). Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with the questions on the scale on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The 12 questions ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) were highly reliable and were averaged to form self-concept clarity scores for each participant.

**Partner Mood.** The scenarios utilized within this study were adapted from Bellavia and Murray (2003). The two scenarios were utilized in order to examine how participants would react to their romantic partner’s mood. Participants were asked to read the scenario and vividly imagine themselves in the situation presented to them. In the *positive partner mood*, participants read a scenario where their partner was in a positive mood, but they lack information about the reason for their mood:

You are about to meet your partner for lunch. You walk into the cafeteria and start scanning the crowd for him. You spot him before he spots you. He is sitting at a table alone, with a contented look on his face. You walk toward him and he finally sees you. He definitely looks like he’s in a good mood. (Bellavia & Murray, p. 6).

In the negative partner mood, participants read a scenario where their partner is in a distinctively negative mood, yet are unaware of why their partner is in this mood:

You’re on your way home from class and you’re thinking about your partner. You think how nice it would be to see him right now. Even though you’re not sure if he’ll be home,

you decide to stop in to see your partner. You get to your partner's place and knock on the door. Your partner opens the door, and you can see from the look on his face that he isn't very happy. (Bellavia & Murray, p. 5-6).

The scenarios were tailored so that the gender of the romantic partner they read the scenario about was matched to participants' gender identity, assuming a heterosexual orientation. Thus, for male participants, the "partner" in the story is female, and for female participants, the "partner" is male. One-hundred and forty-four participants identified as heterosexual, six participants as gay, ten participants as bisexual, and one participant identified as other.

### **Dependent Variables**

**Perceived Responsibility.** To examine how much responsibility participants take for their romantic partner's mood, participants responded to two questions ("My partner's mood is because of my actions" and "My partner's mood is based on something outside of me") on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The second question was reversed scored and averaged together with the first question to form a perceived responsibility index. The two questions, which were adapted from the Bellavia and Murray (2003) study, had high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) and were averaged together to form an index of perceived responsibility.

**Level of Rejection.** In order to analyze the level of rejection felt towards their partner after imagining themselves in the specific mood scenarios, participants responded to three questions (e.g., "I feel my partner is upset with me," "I feel my partner feels negatively towards me," and "I feel my disregarded by my partner") on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The questions utilized in this scale were adapted from Bellavia and Murray (2003) and had high consistency ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) so they were averaged together

to form a rejection level index.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** To determine how satisfied participants felt in their fictional relationship, participants responded to questions on the Relationship Satisfaction Scale (Hendrick, 1998). This 7-question scale was used to examine how satisfied participants were in their current, past, or imagined relationship, after reading the mood scenarios. Example questions include: “How well does your partner meet your needs?” “In general, how satisfied are you in your relationship?” and “How good is your relationship compared to most?”. Participants responded to these seven questions on 5-point scales anchored at “*Poorly*”, “*Unsatisfied*,” and “*Poor*” on the low end and “*Extremely well*”, “*Extremely Satisfied*”, and “*Excellent*” at the high end respectively. The seven questions had high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) and were averaged together, after reverse coding questions four and seven, to form a relationship satisfaction index. Nine participants failed to answer one or more of the questions in the index, so they are omitted from the analyses of this variable.

## Results

This study examined how participants reacted to their romantic partner’s mood when they were randomly assigned to either a positive or negative mood scenario, taking into account self-esteem, and ambivalence.<sup>2</sup> The study hypothesized that self-esteem and partner’s mood would be predictors of perceived responsibility, level of rejection, and relationship satisfaction felt by participants. The study also hypothesized that subjective ambivalence would be associated with perceived responsibility, relationship satisfaction, and level of rejection, in that participants who felt ambivalent about themselves would perceive themselves to be more responsible for their

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<sup>2</sup> I also assessed sexual orientation at the conclusion of the study. Overall, 144 participants reported being heterosexual, 6 reported being gay, 10 reported being bisexual, and 1 reported being other. When I restricted the analyses only to heterosexual participants (with whom the scenarios would have been consistent with their sexual orientation), the conclusions drawn from the statistical tests remained the same (i.e., significant effects remain significant, marginally significant effects remain marginal, and so on).

partners' negative mood and would thus have lower relationship satisfaction and feel more rejected.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and correlations between variables. Notably, self-esteem and ambivalence were negatively correlated, which means that people with higher self-esteem also tended to feel less ambivalent about themselves,  $r(159) = -.55, p < .001$ .

**Perceived Responsibility.** A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was utilized in order to examine whether self-esteem and condition interacted to predict perceived responsibility for partner's mood. Condition and self-esteem were entered in Step 1, and their interaction term was entered in Step 2. Results are interpreted from the first step in the model in which they appear.

Self-esteem significantly predicted perceived responsibility such that higher self-esteem was associated with less perceived responsibility for partner's mood,  $B = -.25, p = .04$ . Also, partner's mood affected perceived responsibility overall,  $B = -0.15, p = .05$ . Specifically, participants in the negative partner mood scenario ( $M = 2.62, SD = 1.06$ ) perceived themselves to be more responsible than participants in the positive partner mood scenario ( $M = 2.32, SD = .91$ ).

Most central to the study's hypothesis however, there was a marginally significant interaction between self-esteem and partner's mood scenario when it came to predicting perceived responsibility for partner's mood,  $B = .23, p = .06$ . When looking at low self-esteem individuals (1 SD below the mean), perceived responsibility was higher in the negative partner mood scenarios compared to the positive partner mood scenario,  $B = -.30, p = .006$ . However, participants with high self-esteem (1 SD above the mean) did not differ in perceived responsibility between negative and positive mood scenarios,  $B = -.003, p = .98$  (see Figure 1).

Data were also submitted to an additional test to examine whether these results were further moderated by ambivalence. Results showed that the 3-way interaction was nonsignificant,  $B = -.09$ ,  $p = .17$ . That is, the self-esteem  $\times$  mood interaction did not differ between low (vs. high) self-ambivalence.

**Level of Rejection.** A second multiple regression analysis was conducted to look at how self-esteem and partner's mood interacted to predict level of rejection felt by participants.

Self-esteem was a significant predictor of level of rejection, in that greater self-esteem corresponded to lower feelings of rejection,  $B = -0.38$ ,  $p = .001$ . Partner's mood was also a significant predictor of the amount of rejection felt by participants; participants assigned to the negative mood scenario ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) felt more rejected by their romantic partner than those in the positive mood scenario ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = .10$ ),  $B = -.57$ ,  $p < .001$ .

There was no significant interaction between self-esteem and partner's mood when it came to predicting level of rejection (see Figure 2),  $B = .10$ ,  $p = .37$ . Participant's with low self-esteem (1 SD below the mean), assigned to the negative mood scenario rated their feelings of rejection higher than those in the positive mood scenario,  $B = -.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . High self-esteem participant's (1 SD above the mean), in the negative mood scenario also rated their feelings of rejection higher than those in the positive mood scenario,  $B = -.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Another analysis focused on the 3-way interaction, treating ambivalence as an additional moderator, showed that this 3-way was nonsignificant,  $B = -.04$ ,  $p = .56$ .

**Relationship Satisfaction.** A third multiple regression analysis was employed to look at whether self-esteem and condition level interacted to predict relationship satisfaction.

Self-esteem was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction: participants with low self-esteem reported having lower relationship satisfaction than those with high self-esteem,

$B = 0.28, p = .001$ . Also, the manipulation of partner's mood affected relationship satisfaction, in that participants who were in the negative mood scenario ( $M = 3.18, SD = .72$ ) reported lower relationship satisfaction than those who were in the positive mood scenario ( $M = 3.83, SD = .73$ ),  $B = .32, p < 0.001$ .

There was no significant interaction between self-esteem and partner's mood when it came to predicting relationship satisfaction,  $B = .007, p = .94$  (see Figure 3). When examining low self-esteem individuals (1 SD below the mean), relationship satisfaction was lower in the negative mood scenario compared to the positive mood scenario,  $B = .32, p < .001$ . Participants with high self-esteem (1 SD above the mean) also rated their relationship satisfaction higher in the positive mood scenario compared to the negative mood scenario,  $B = .33, p < .001$

The study also looked at ambivalence as a moderator of the results. The 3-way interaction was nonsignificant,  $B = -.026, p = .59$ .

### **Exploratory Analysis: Self-Concept Clarity**

As explained previously, the construct of self-concept clarity (SCC) was included in this study due to its assumed relationship with self-related ambivalence. Although the previous analyses failed to show any effects of self-ambivalence, SCC was nevertheless explored as a potentially relevant variable in the current study on relationships.

Correlation analyses reveal that SCC and self-esteem are positively correlated,  $r(159) = .58, p < .001$ . Greater SCC was also associated with less self-related ambivalence such that a clearer sense of self was associated with less conflicting self-attitudes,  $r(159) = -.75, p < .001$ . SCC, however, was also associated with the key relationship variables in this study. First, the less clear people were about themselves, the more they perceived themselves to be responsible for their partner's moods,  $r(159) = -.27, p = .001$ . Second, participants that felt less clearly about

themselves reported feeling more rejected by their romantic partners,  $r(159) = -.38, p < .001$ .

Lastly, the more clear people were about themselves, the more satisfied they felt in their romantic relationships,  $r(150) = .28, p = .001$ .

SCC was also tested as a moderator of the effects of the study's manipulation on the three key dependent measures. First, there was a significant interaction between SCC and partner's mood when it came to predicting perceived responsibility for partner's mood,  $B = .17, p = .04$ . Participants with low SCC perceived responsibility to be higher in the negative partner mood compared to the positive partner mood,  $B = -.30, p = .004$ . However, participants with high SCC did not differ by partner's mood when it came to perceived responsibility,  $B = .01, p = .90$  (see Figure 4). This interaction is still significant when controlling for self-esteem,  $B = .17, p = .04$ .

Second, the SCC x Partner's Mood interaction was nonsignificant when it came to level of rejection,  $B = 0.07, p = 0.30$ . Results were also not significant when analyzing relationship satisfaction,  $B = 0.04, p = 0.52$ . Results for these analyses suggest that even when self-esteem is controlled for, results remain nonsignificant.

### Discussion

Previous research suggests that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and reactions to romantic partner's mood (Bellavia & Murray, 2003). The current study replicated these results in two ways. First, similar to Bellavia and Murray's (2003) study, self-esteem was associated with how responsible people thought they were for their romantic partner's mood, which depended on whether that mood was negative or positive. Specifically, those with low self-esteem perceived themselves to be more responsible for their partner's mood in the negative mood scenario compared to the positive mood scenario. Those with higher self-esteem, however, did not differ in perceived responsibility when comparing the positive mood scenario to the

negative mood scenario. These results suggest that participants felt the most responsibility for their partner's mood when they had low self-esteem and believed that their partner was in a negative mood. Participants with high self-esteem, who believed their partner was in a positive mood, felt the least responsible for their partner's mood.

Second, the study replicated Bellavia and Murray (2003) when looking at level of felt rejection. While the study did not find an interaction between self-esteem and condition level, it did find two main effects. Considering the relationship between self-esteem and level of rejection, participants who reported having low self-esteem considered themselves to be more rejected than participants with high self-esteem (regardless of their partner's mood). When looking at the relationship between partner's mood and level of rejection, participants in the negative partner mood condition rated themselves as more rejected than those in the positive partner mood.

The study adds to the research on self-esteem and romantic relationships by testing a new variable, relationship satisfaction. Research on the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction suggest that initial levels of self-esteem are good predictors of how satisfied couples will be with their partners (Erol & Orth, 2013; Orth et al., 2012). Studies have also concluded that low self-esteem individuals tend to self-handicap in romantic relationships more than their high self-esteem counterparts (Murray et al., 2000). The findings of the study extend this research. While there was no interaction between self-esteem and condition level, there were two main effects. Looking at the association between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, participants with low self-esteem perceived the relationship to be less satisfying than participants with high self-esteem. Considering the association between partner's mood and

relationship satisfaction, participants in the negative partner mood condition considered their relationships to be less satisfying than those in the positive partner mood.

Previous research indicates that people with lower self-esteem tend to misjudge how positively their romantic partner's view them, and in turn consider their relationships to be less satisfying overall (Murray et al., 2000). People's negative perceptions of themselves lead them to feel less positivity about their romantic partner and the relationship they are in. The results of my study help to extend the research regarding the relationship between self-esteem and romantic relationships. My findings show that lower self-esteem individuals tend to consider themselves to be more responsible for their partner's negative mood, feel higher levels of rejection, and feel less satisfied in their relationships. These results indicate that people with lower self-esteem tend to view their romantic relationships with more negativity than those with higher self-esteem (Murray et al., 2000).

The secondary hypotheses regarding ambivalence were not supported. My study predicted that there would be a three-way interaction between ambivalence, self-esteem, and partner's mood for the three dependent variables. However, the results of my study found that ambivalence did not play a role when it came to self-esteem's effects on the three relationship variables.

The last aspect of the study, however, examined self-concept clarity (SCC) in relation to the three dependent variables. SCC was a significant predictor of perceived responsibility for partner's mood. Specifically, when participants had low SCC and were in the negative mood scenario, they perceived themselves to be more responsible for their partner's mood than those in the positive mood scenario. Participants with high SCC did not differ much in terms of perceived responsibility when it came to the negative and positive mood scenarios. These results suggest

that when people are less clear about themselves they perceive themselves to be more responsible for their partner's moods, while people who feel more clearly about themselves take on less responsibility. SCC was not a significant predictor of level of rejection felt and relationship satisfaction.

### **Implications and Applications**

**Ambivalence.** It is important to examine why ambivalence was a nonsignificant moderator between self-esteem, partner mood, and the three dependent variables. One explanation for the results may be that ambivalence in and of itself is still relevant when it comes to moderating the effects of self-esteem on the way people react to their romantic partners' moods but did not emerge in the context of this study for a variety of reasons. One reason is that my study measured subjective ambivalence rather than objective ambivalence. Previous research on context sensitivity, on which my hypotheses were based, uses objective ambivalence as a measure. For example, objective ambivalence predicts attitude changes across different contexts, but the same effect was not true for subjective ambivalence (Luttrell et al., 2016). While I did attempt to measure objective ambivalence within the study, a technical error rendered this measure invalid. It is also possible that ambivalence matters in more highly realistic scenarios, whereas my study focused on hypothetical scenarios. I expand more on this later in the discussion.

It is, however, possible that my hypotheses were incorrect and ambivalence does not play an important role in the relationship between self-esteem and romantic relationships. One explanation for this might be that the self is different from other attitudes in the context of relationships. Perhaps ambivalence plays a more important role when looking at attitudes towards specific entities, but is less imperative when one considers the self. People might

consider their attitudes towards the self to be more definitive and important. Specifically, if a person has a clear idea about their self-esteem, they likely have a better idea about who they are—suggesting that ambivalence might not relate to attitudes about the self. Nevertheless, this explanation is less compelling in light of previous research, which has documented links between ambivalence and self-esteem (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2004; DeMarree et al., 2011).

It is also important to consider the research on ambivalence and adaptability when considering this hypothesis. This research focuses on the idea that people high in ambivalence are able to consider an issue from multiple angles due to their mixed opinions. Thus, they are more able to adapt to situations where there is a controversial topic at hand than their univalent counterparts (Pillaud et al., 2013; Bell & Esses, 1997). In the context of my study, it is possible that people with ambivalent low or high self-esteem might have adapted to the mood scenarios and reacted to them as they assumed a person with non-ambivalent self-esteem might have. Rather than allowing their ambivalent nature to affect the way they perceived their romantic partner's mood, participants adapted to the self-esteem they identified with, thus reacting in a way consistent with other univalent self-esteem individuals.

**Self-Esteem and Relationships.** Across all three of the dependent variables, it is clear that people with lower self-esteem tend to suffer more within their romantic relationships. These individuals tend to feel less positively about their relationships and are more likely to feel uneasy when their partners are in bad moods. These findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that having lower self-esteem leads to individuals projecting their own insecurities onto their romantic partner (Murray et al., 2000).

It is necessary to closely examine the interaction between self-esteem and perceived responsibility, which shows that low self-esteem individuals tend to perceive themselves as more responsible for their partner's negative mood. This interaction is important, especially when looking at the possible long-term effects of constantly taking responsibility for a partner's bad mood. If low self-esteem individuals consistently perceive themselves to be responsible for their partner's negative mood, it is possible that their self-esteem will continue to deteriorate as time goes on. Thus, while low self-esteem leads individuals to take on more responsibility, it is possible that continuously taking on this responsibility can lead one to further worsen their self-esteem. These results are likely consistent amongst different types of relationships and are not purely confined to romantic relationships. I would suggest that these effects might take place in different types of relationships including friendship and familial relationships. Further research is necessary in order to appropriately examine how self-esteem and perceived responsibility for a person's mood might further worsen self-esteem across a vast variety of different relationships.

The study's results may have implications for the "partners" in the relationship. That is, future research on self-esteem and relationships might focus on the toll that low self-esteem has on the romantic partner him or herself. As previously mentioned when participants have low self-esteem their relationship satisfaction tends to decrease (Murray et al., 2000). These effects are likely present for both the low self-esteem individual as well as their romantic partner. The partners of individuals with low self-esteem are generally not examined in the context of relationship satisfaction. In order to extend the current research, it would be interesting to look at how low self-esteem individuals' partners are affected by their significant others' negative feelings about themselves. I would suggest that low self-esteem in one partner impacts the way that the couple functions as a whole and thus how satisfied they are with the relationship overall.

In order to extend the current findings, future research might attempt to find effective interventions, which could help improve self-esteem, thus improving overall relationship satisfaction amongst romantic partners.

**Self-Concept Clarity.** The relationship between SCC and perceived responsibility for partner's mood suggests that when people have a clear conception of the self, they tend to take on less responsibility for their partner's negative mood. These findings are important as they indicate that having more clarity about the self helps individuals to interpret their romantic partner's behavior. Rather than assuming that their partner is in a negative mood because of them, individuals with high SCC might realize that their partner's mood might be caused by another factor. Their ability to understand themselves more clearly also helps them to understand their partner more clearly. The findings also build on previous research that suggests that people with higher self-esteem have higher SCC (DeMarree & Rios Morrison, 2012), as the interaction present between SCC and perceived responsibility was almost identical to that of self-esteem and perceived responsibility. There were no significant interactions between SCC and condition level when it came to predicting level of rejection and relationship satisfaction. However, similar to self-esteem, there were significant correlations between SCC and level of rejection and relationship satisfaction, suggesting that there is an overall relationship. It is important that future relationship research focuses on SCC because there is little research to date that has drawn a connection between SCC and relationship variables. My research suggests that there is much to build off of in this field.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

The study at hand has a few limitations, which may have affected the outcome of the results. One of the main flaws of the study regarded the phrasing of the mood scenario

descriptions. In the positive partner mood scenario, the participants see their significant other from afar and perceive that they are in a “good” mood. In the negative mood scenario, participants go up to their partners’ homes, their partner opens the door, and participants can see that he or she “isn’t very happy.” In the positive condition, the participant’s significant other does not see them, but in the negative condition, their partner is aware of their presence. By the romantic partner seeing their significant other in the negative partner mood, there may have been more of an implication that their partner was to blame for their mood, compared to the positive partner mood in which the partner is not even aware of the participant’s presence. The discrepancies between the two scenarios may have led participants to interpret the conditions in different ways. Specifically, the higher perceived responsibility ratings in the negative (vs. positive) condition may not be due to the *negative* mood per se but are instead due to incidental features in the scenario that suggest the participant prompted the emotional reaction. In the future it would be best to phrase the scenarios identically, substituting only the mood on the partner’s face.

A second limitation of the study is that my scenarios were imagined. Some participants may not have been able to relate to the scenarios at hand as they were not very realistic. Participants may not have been in romantic relationships at the time or ever, and thus had to imagine how the scenarios would make them feel if they were in the situation. Participants who did not find the scenarios to be realistic or relatable may have answered the questions without giving much consideration. It is also possible that people may respond differently to situations when they are imagined compared to when they are actually confronted with the experience.

Lastly, while the sample size ( $N = 161$ ) was large enough to find significant results for the two-way interaction, it is possible that this was not a large enough sample size for finding

significant three-way interactions. Thus, it is possible that the smaller sample size impacted my ability to find results indicating ambivalence as a moderator.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

While the results of the study replicated the results of Bellavia and Murray (2003) when it came to perceived responsibility and level of rejection, I did not find the effects I hypothesized regarding ambivalence. I did, however, find that self-esteem and the negativity or positivity of participants' partners' moods were strong predictors of relationship satisfaction. While the research suggests that ambivalence may not play an important role when it comes to self-esteem and relationships, it does document an intriguing result of self-concept clarity in the context of relationships. Self-concept clarity and ambivalence may be important starting points for future research wishing to extend the findings of self-esteem's impact on romantic relationships.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Variables*

Measures	2	3	4	5	6	M	SD
1. Self-Esteem	-.16*	.24**	-.26**	-.55**	.58**	3.06	.64
2. Perceived Responsibility	-	-.20*	.56**	.09	-.27**	2.47	.99
3. Relationship Satisfaction		-	-.54**	-.21**	.28**	3.51	.79
4. Level of Rejection			-	.17*	-.38**	2.17	1.11
5. Subjective Ambivalence					-.75**	4.15	1.90
6. Self-Concept Clarity Scale					-	3.50	.96

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

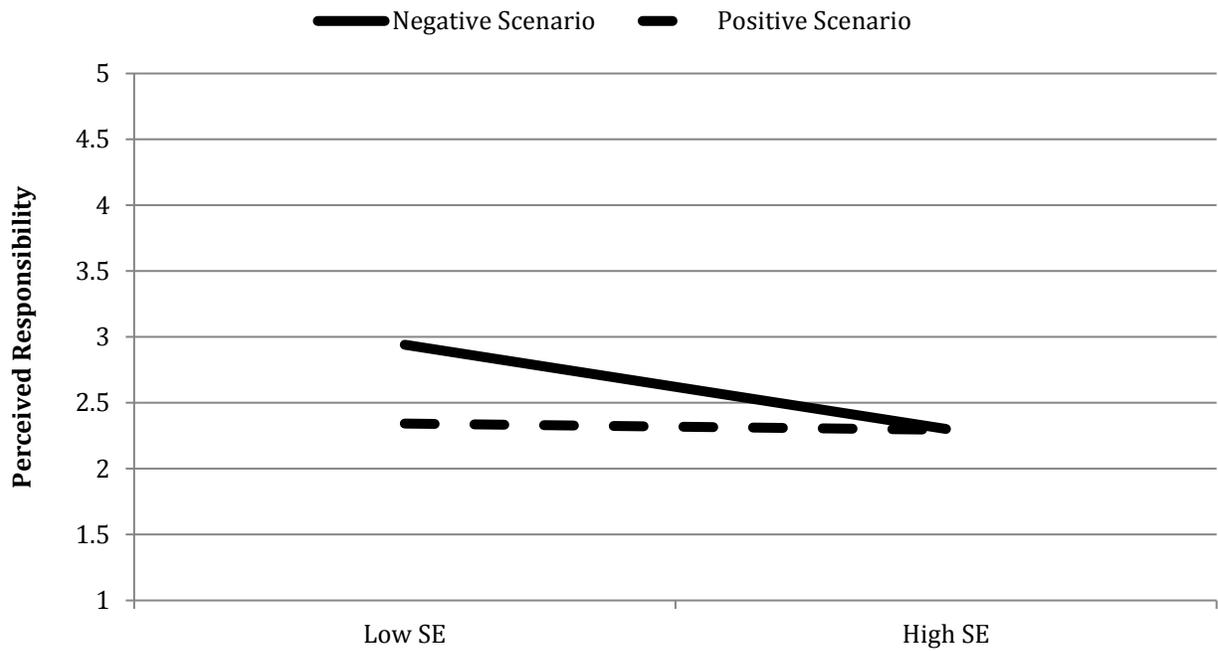


Figure 1. Self-esteem (SE) and mood scenario as predicting variables of participants perceived responsibility for romantic partners' moods.

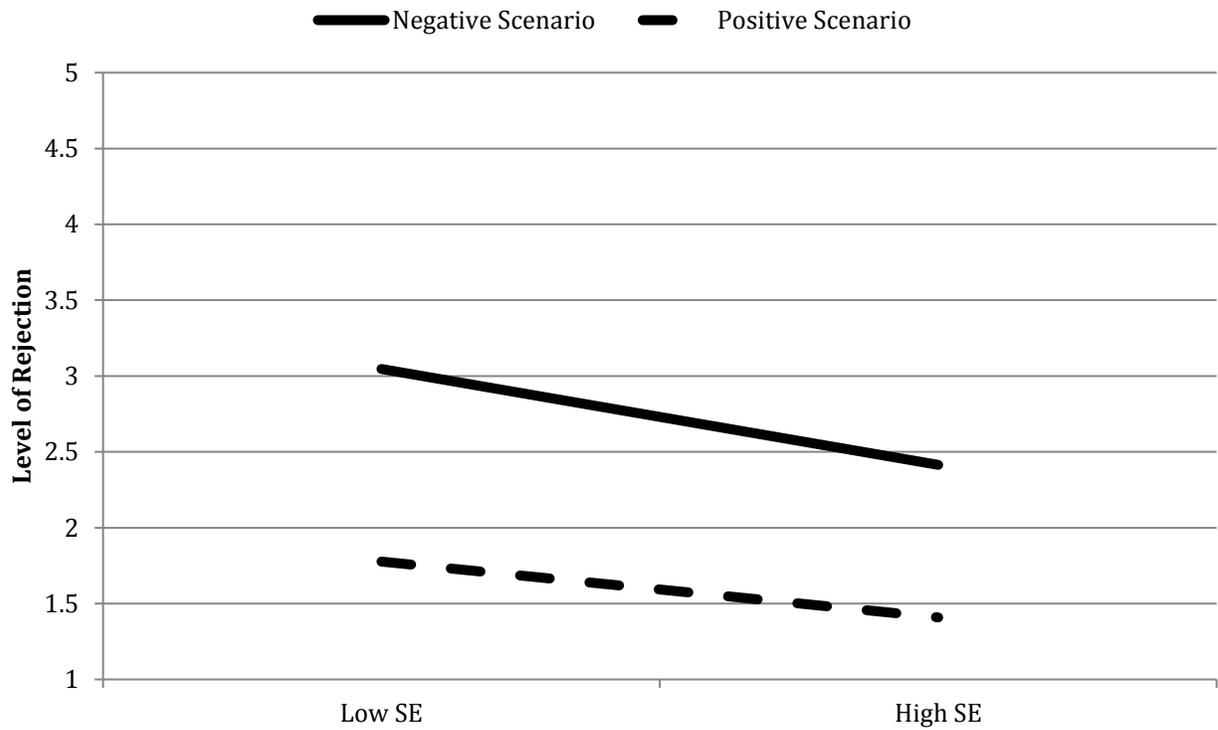


Figure 2. Self-esteem (SE) and mood scenarios as predicting variables for the level of rejection participants felt towards their romantic partners.

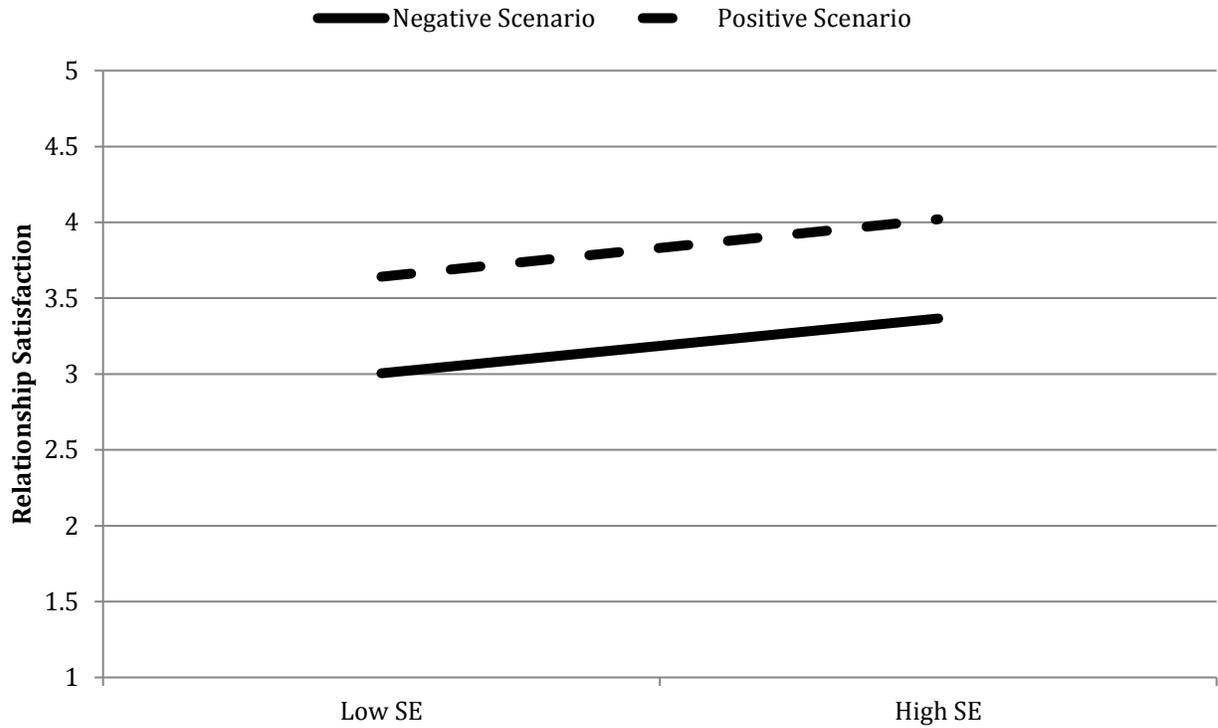


Figure 3. Self-esteem (SE) and mood scenarios as predicting variables for participant’s relationship satisfaction.

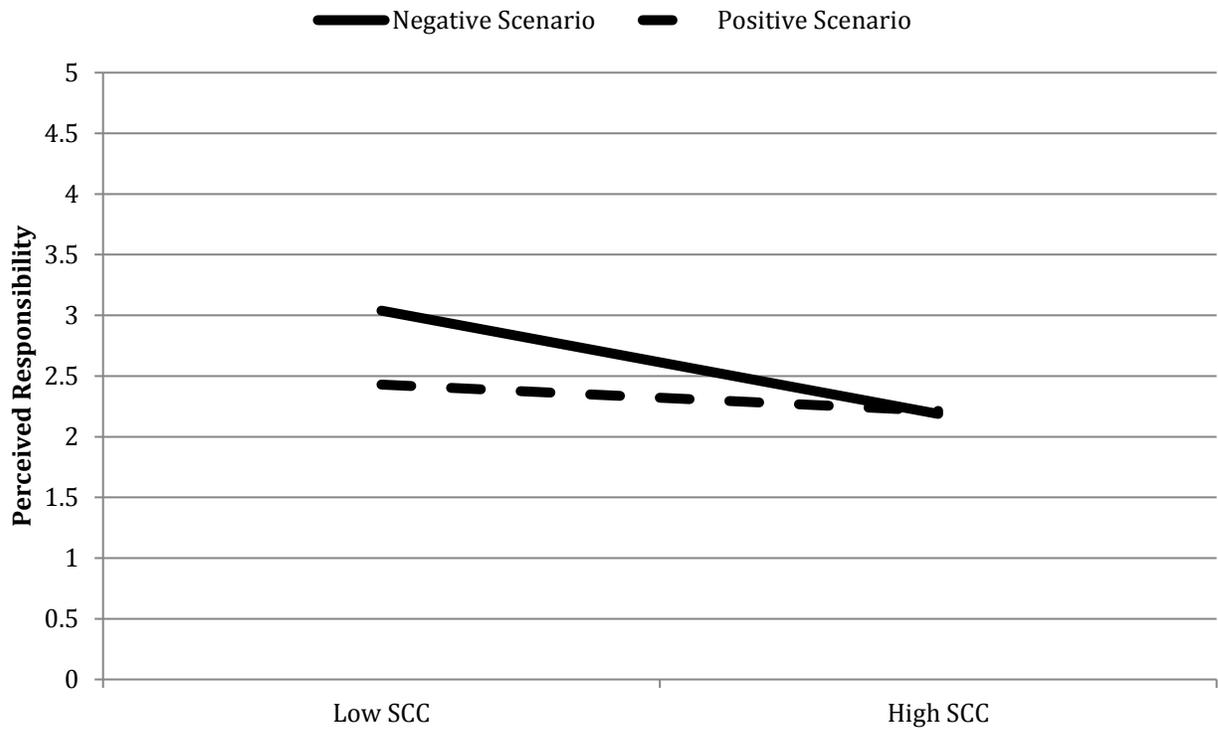


Figure 4. Self-concept clarity scale (SCC) and mood scenario as predicting variables of participants' perceived responsibility for their romantic partner's mood.

## Appendix A

## Partner's Mood Scenario's

## Positive Mood Scenario

You are about to meet your partner for lunch. You walk into the cafeteria and start scanning the crowd for him/her. You spot him/her before he/she spots you. He/she is sitting at a table alone, with a contented look on his face. You walk toward him/her and he/she finally sees you. He/she definitely looks like he's/she's in a good mood.

## Negative Mood Scenario

You're on your way home from class and you're thinking about your partner. You think how nice it would be to see him/her right now. Even though you're not sure if he'll/she'll be home, you decide to stop in to see your partner. You get to your partner's place and knock on the door. Your partner opens the door, and you can see from the look on his/her face that he/she isn't very happy.

## Appendix B

## Survey Questionnaire

## Demographic Questions

DEM1 What is your gender identity?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Gender Queer/Non Binary (3)
- Intersex (4)

DEM2 What is your age?

DEM3 What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual (1)
- Homosexual (2)
- Bisexual (3)
- Other (4)
- Prefer not to say (5)

## Self-Esteem Questions

SE1 On the whole, I am generally satisfied with myself.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE2 At times I think I am no good at all.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE3 I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE4 I am able to do things as well as most other people.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE5 I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE6 I certainly feel useless at times.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE7 I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE8 I wish I could have more respect for myself.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE9 All in all I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

SE10 I take a positive attitude toward myself.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

#### Objective Ambivalence Questions

OBA1 Considering only the POSITIVE features of yourself and ignoring the negative ones, how positive would you say your thoughts and feelings toward yourself are?

- 0 Not at all positive (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 (6)
- 6 (7)
- 7 (8)
- 8 (9)
- 9 (10)
- 10 Extremely positive (11)

OBA2 Now considering only the NEGATIVE features of yourself and ignoring the positive ones, how negative would you say your thoughts and feelings toward yourself are?

- 0 Not at all positive (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 (6)
- 6 (7)
- 7 (8)
- 8 (9)
- 9 (10)
- 10 Maximum Positive (11)

## Subjective Ambivalence Questions

SA1 To what extent do you feel conflict when you think about yourself?

- 1 Not at all conflicted (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 Extremely Conflicted (9)

SA2 To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward yourself one-sided or mixed?

- 1 Completely one sided (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 Completely mixed (9)

SA3 To what extent is your reaction toward yourself confused?

- 1 Not at all confused (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 Extremely confused (9)

## Self-Concept Clarity Questions

SCCS1 My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS2 On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS3 I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS4 Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS5 When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I'm not sure what I was really like.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS6 I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS7 Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS8 My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS9 If I were asked to describe my personality, my description might end up being different from one day to another day.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS10 Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I'm really like.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS11 In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

SCCS12 It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don't really know what I want.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

For the following questions, answer them based on your feelings in the scenario you just read. That is, if that scenario happened in your own life, how would you think and feel about it?

#### Perceived Responsibility Questions

PR1 It seems like my partner's mood in this scenario was because of something I did.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

PR2 It seems like my partner's mood in this scenario was caused by something other than my own actions.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

## Level of Rejection Questions

LOR1 I feel my partner is upset with me.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

LOR2 I feel my partner feels negatively towards me.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

LOR3 I feel disregarded by my partner.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

## Relationship Satisfaction Questions

RAS1 How well does it seem that your partner meet your needs?

- Poorly (1)
- (2)
- Average (3)
- (4)
- Extremely well (5)

RAS2 In general, how satisfied would you be with this relationship?

- Unsatisfied (1)
- (2)
- Average (3)
- (4)
- Extremely satisfied (5)

RAS3 How good is this relationship compared to most?

- Poor (1)
- 2 (2)
- Average (3)
- 4 (4)
- Excellent (5)

RAS4 How often would it seem that you'd wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?

- Never (1)
- 2 (2)
- Average (3)
- 4 (4)
- Very often (5)

RAS5 To what extent would it seem that this relationship met your original expectations?

- Hardly at all (1)
- 2 (2)
- Average (3)
- 4 (4)
- Completely (5)

RAS6 How much would it seem that you love your partner?

- Hardly at all (1)
- 2 (2)
- Average (3)
- 4 (4)
- Very much (5)

RAS7 How many problems would it seem there are in your relationship?

- Very few (1)
- 2 (2)
- Average (3)
- 4 (4)
- Very many (5)

