Changing Me to Keep You: State Jealousy Promotes Perceiving Similarity Between the Self and a Romantic Rival

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Abstract
Individuals sometimes alter their self-views to be more similar to others—traditionally romantic partners—because they are motivated to do so. A common motivating force is the desire to affiliate with a partner. The current research examined whether a different motivation—romantic jealousy—might promote individuals to alter their self-views to be more similar to a romantic rival, rather than a partner. Romantic jealousy occurs when individuals perceive a rival as a threat to their relationship and motivates individuals to defend their relationship. We proposed that one novel way that individuals might defend their relationship is by seeing themselves as more similar to a perceived romantic rival. We predicted that state romantic jealousy would motivate these self-alterations. Three studies confirmed these hypotheses.

Keywords
Self-concept malleability, motivation, romantic jealousy, relationship maintenance

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In the hit film Legally Blonde, the lead character Elle’s boyfriend, Warner, leaves her for a smarter, more serious romantic partner named Vivian. In the wake of this betrayal, Elle not only feels extreme jealousy but also realizes that to win her boyfriend back, she must become more like the romantic rival who lured him away. Although, Elle changes many things about herself in her efforts to be similar to Vivian, this change begins with an alteration of how Elle views herself. In essence, Elle changes her views about who she is from identifying as ditzy sorority girl with an interest in fashion to a hard-working intellectual law student. Motivated by jealousy, Elle strives to see herself as more like Vivian, her romantic rival, because she believes that Vivian possesses the attributes that Warner finds attractive.

In the current research, we investigated whether individuals would alter their self-views to be more similar to others—specifically romantic partners—when motivated by the experience of romantic jealousy. Past research has demonstrated that individuals do change their self-views to become more similar to others—specifically romantic partners—when motivated to do so (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012; Slotter & Lucas, 2013). In this past work, the desire to affiliate with the partner serves as the driving motivation behind these self-alterations. In the current research, we proposed that romantic jealousy can also serve as a motivator, prompting individuals to see themselves as more similar to a romantic rival, rather than a partner. Jealousy occurs when a third party, either a real or imagined rival, is seen as a threat to the maintenance of a romantic relationship (e.g., Scheikman & Werneck, 2010). If this rival possesses characteristics not possessed by the jealous individual, which the jealous individual thinks are attractive characteristics to the partner, we predicted that the individual would shift his or her self-views to be more similar to the romantic rival. Altering self-views to be more similar to a romantic rival would reflect an effort to embody characteristics thought to be attractive to the partner, and thus preserve the partner’s interest and the relationship.

The Malleable Self-Concept
The self-concept is a person’s sense of “me”: the physical appearance, material belongings, set of roles, prototypes, scripts, attitudes, beliefs, and attributes that a person thinks

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Essentially, the self-concept functions as the interpreter and organizer of the self-relevant information that individuals encounter in the world; in turn, its content and organization influence individuals’ cognition, behavior, affect, and motivational strivings (e.g., Markus, 1977; McConnell, 2011). Central to the current research, the self-concept is grounded in individuals’ experiences, including those in the social world (e.g., James, 1890; Mead, 1934) and in close relationships (e.g., Aron, 2003; Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In many ways, the self-concept negotiates the interaction between a person and his or her surroundings (Cross & Madson, 1997). Thus, individuals actively construct and alter their self-concepts to meet the demands of their social circumstances.

Past research has demonstrated that one important way that individuals alter their self-concepts according to their social environments is by altering their self-views to be more similar to their important relationship partners. Specifically, in romantic relationships, individuals’ self-concepts become highly malleable, often expanding to incorporate characteristics of the relationship partner’s self into their own sense of who they are (e.g., Aron, 2003; Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). The shared experiences, resources, and self-disclosures that occur in romantic relationships contribute to people expanding their self-concepts to be more similar to the partner.

Emerging research has demonstrated that individuals also spontaneously alter their self-views to be more similar to romantic partners, without shared experience, because they are motivated to do so. Specifically, individuals expand their self-concepts to incorporate novel characteristics of current and desired romantic partners when they are motivated by the desire to draw closer to, or affiliate with, the partner (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012; Slotter & Lucas, 2013). The current research sought to test the limits of motivated self-change by investigating whether individuals can be motivated by a force other than affiliation to incorporate characteristics of individuals other than their partners into their self-views. Specifically, we propose that elevated feelings of romantic jealousy can promote individuals spontaneously altering self-views to incorporate characteristics of a romantic rival.

**Romantic Jealousy As a Motivator for Self-Concept Malleability**

Jealousy is a fundamentally social human emotion that has existed across history and cultures (DeSteno, Valdesolo, & Bartlett, 2006). Individuals can experience jealousy in a variety of relational contexts, including sibling rivalry, jealousy in friendships, and romantic jealousy. In each case, jealousy results from competition for a relationship, which stems from the perception that another person’s presence threatens an important relational bond (Buss & Haselton, 2005; Harmon-Jones, Peterson, & Harris, 2009; Scheikman & Wernick, 2010). Essentially, individuals experience jealousy when they possess a valuable good and believe that they might lose this good to another individual (Castelfranchi & Miceli, 2009). The current research investigated the role that romantic jealousy might play in promoting malleability of individuals’ self-concepts. Thus, in the current work, we were primarily interested in individuals’ experience of jealousy when the valuable good they possess is their romantic partner who is expressing interest in a romantic rival.

At its foundation, romantic jealousy is a motivational mechanism evolved to monitor the potential of losing a romantic relationship and defend against the threat of loss (Buss & Haselton, 2005). Individuals’ behavioral responses to romantic jealousy are aimed at protecting their relationship and range from communication with the partner to violence aimed at the partner or perceived rival (e.g., Kaighobadi, Shackelford, & Goetz, 2009). A common behavioral response to jealousy involves individuals engaging in behaviors aimed at keeping, or retaining, their partner (Buss, 1988; Kaighobadi et al., 2009). Mate retention tactics all aim to protect one’s relationship from rivals, but differ in whether they are intrasexual or intersexual in nature. Intrasexual attempts at mate retention include public signals of possession of a partner (e.g., public displays of affection), and threats toward the romantic rival (Buss, 1988). In contrast, intersexual attempts at mate retention include emphasizing one’s love and care for one’s partner, and enhancing one’s physical appearance to keep the partner’s interest (Buss, 1988). Importantly, intrasexual attempts at mate retention are driven by the perception of a rival’s interest in one’s partner and the desire to deter the rival, whereas intersexual attempts at mate retention are driven by the perception of one’s partner’s interest in a rival and the desire to keep the partner’s interest (e.g., Buss, 1988).

Given the function of romantic jealousy as a motivational system, the current research investigated whether jealousy could motivate individuals to alter their self-views to protect their relationship from intrusion by a romantic rival. We proposed that, when individuals perceive their partner to be attracted to a potential rival, they should experience romantic jealousy. We also proposed that individuals should be motivated to see themselves as more similar to a rival, even adopting the rival’s characteristics, to the extent that they are at risk of losing their partner to the romantic rival. Thus, we argued that the experience of romantic jealousy should prompt individuals to engage in an intersexual mate retention technique of taking on the attributes of another individual who they view is a threat to their current relationship in an effort to keep their partner’s attention and interest.

**Research Overview and Hypotheses**

The current research sought to investigate whether individuals would alter their self-views to be more similar to a perceived romantic rival when experiencing romantic jealousy. Specifically, we hypothesized that the experience of elevated
state jealousy (increased jealousy in a moment or situation) would motivate individuals to perceive themselves as more similar to a romantic rival, even altering specific self-views. However, we also hypothesized that this motivated self-malleability is an intersexual mate retention technique—aimed at keeping the partner’s attention rather than deterring a rival—and so should only emerge when individuals perceive their romantic partner to be expressing interest in or flirting with a rival. Thus, our overarching theoretical model was as follows: Individuals who perceive their romantic partner to be expressing interest in a potential romantic rival will experience elevated levels of state jealousy, which will, in turn, motivate them to perceive themselves as more similar to the romantic rival.

We tested these predictions across three studies that tested varied aspects of our theoretical model. Study 1 examined whether the experience of state jealousy would predict general feelings of similarity to a romantic rival, Study 2 examined whether experimentally inducing individuals to perceive their partner as interested in a rival would promote individuals altering specific self-views on self-report and reaction time measures to be more similar to the rival, and Studies 3a and 3b examined whether experimentally induced jealousy would mediate the relationship between perceiving their partner as interested in a rival and individuals altering their self-views to be more similar to the rival. The current studies used varied methods and samples to investigate when individuals might be motivated to alter their self-views to be more similar to someone other than a romantic partner. Specifically, we investigated whether feelings of romantic jealousy might motivate individuals to view themselves as more similar to a romantic rival in an effort to retain their partner’s attention and affection.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Participants were 81 romantically involved individuals (43 women, 38 men) who took part in the current study in exchange for US $0.50 monetary compensation. Participants were from a nonstudent sample recruited with Amazon’s Mechanical Turk interface (Mturk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) and were 33.62 years old, on average (SD = 11.20, range = 18 - 62). All participants were in dating (n = 14), engaged (n = 19), or marital relationships (n = 45; 3 participants did not report relationship status) that were an average of 91.67 months in length (SD = 107.80, range = 3 - 432).

Procedure. Participants completed all aspects of the study during a single, online session. On beginning their session, participants first reported their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy. Then, they were instructed to recall, for 3 minutes, a time in their relationship when they felt threatened or upset by an interaction their romantic partner had with another individual. We specifically asked participants to consider a time when their partner interacted with someone he/she could potentially be romantically interested in, someone the participant considered a romantic rival. Participants then responded to several items regarding the interaction they described. Relevant to the current study, they reported on their state experience of jealousy regarding the interaction they recalled and how similar they thought they were to the romantic rival in the interaction they recalled.

Measures

Dispositional jealousy. Participants completed an eight-item measure of their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1999; “I would feel jealous if my partner spent time with someone else,” 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .85). These eight items were averaged together to create an index of participants’ tendencies toward jealousy (M = 4.47, SD = 1.24).

State jealousy. Participants completed a one-item measure of how jealous they felt during the interaction they had recalled (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; M = 5.35, SD = 1.91). Participants’ self-reports of state jealousy after recalling the interaction correlated with their reports of their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy, Pearson’s r = .22, p < .05.

Perceived similarity to the rival. Participants completed a two-item measure assessing their perceptions of how similar they were to the romantic rival. Specifically, participants rated how similar they were to the rival and how much they had in common with the rival (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; α = .94). These two items were averaged together to create an index of participants who perceived similarity to the romantic rival (M = 2.83, SD = 1.83).

Results and Discussion

To begin testing our central hypothesis that the experience of jealousy may promote individuals’ perceiving themselves as more similar to a potential romantic rival, we conducted a regression predicting participants’ perceived similarity to the romantic rival in the interaction they had recalled from their self-reported dispositional and state jealousy, entered simultaneously. All variables were standardized prior to analyses (M = 0, SD = 1). As hypothesized, participants’ state jealousy regarding the interaction they recalled predicted them perceiving themselves as more similar to the potential romantic rival, β = .25, t(76) = 2.42, p < .05; however, their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy did not, β = .11, t(76) = .99, p = .33 (overall R² = .09).1

The findings from Study 1 provide support for the initial piece of our theoretical model: Elevated feelings of state jealousy predict individuals viewing themselves as more
similar to a romantic rival. Although Study 1 began to test our hypotheses, it possessed several limitations, which we sought to address in subsequent studies. Specifically, Study 1 examined correlational associations and did not examine the specific behaviors that participants found jealousy inducing. Thus, the findings from Study 1 could not test the second piece of our theoretical model as we cannot assess whether the nature of the partner’s behavior or the rival’s behavior is predicting perceived similarity to the rival. As stated previously, we hypothesized that individuals would express greater perceived similarity to a romantic rival when their partner is responsive to the romantic advances of another. In Study 2, we attempted to address this question using an experimental paradigm to vary whether the romantic rival is explicitly making advances toward the romantic partner and whether the partner is receptive to those advances.

Study 2

In Study 2, we examined the second piece of our theoretical model that having their partner express interest in a romantic rival would predict individuals altering their self-views to be more similar to the rival. In addition, in Study 2, we sought to expand on Study 1 in three ways. First, we experimentally manipulated participants’ perceptions of their partner’s and a rival’s behavior in a potentially jealousy-inducing scenario. Specifically, we examined whether increased perceived similarity to a rival can be attributed to individuals attempting to retain a partner whose interest might be waning—an intrasexual mate retention strategy that should be driven by the partner’s flirtatious behavior—or, to individuals attempting to deter a rival who is encroaching on their relationship—an intersexual mate retention strategy that should be driven by the partner’s flirtatious behavior. In Study 2, we also expanded on Study 1 by examining shifts in individuals’ specific perceptions of themselves. Finally, we included a reaction time-based, implicit measure of self-concept maladjustment.

Method

Participants. Participants were 71 romantically involved, heterosexual undergraduates (48 women, 20 men, 3 unreported) who took part in the current study in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were 18.99 years old, on average (SD = 1.53, range = 18 - 29. All participants were in exclusive dating relationships that were an average of 16.55 months in length (SD = 16.27, range = 1 - 96).

Procedure. Participants first completed a self-rating task, described below, at a pretesting session that took place prior to all laboratory sessions. As described below, a single not me attribute was idiographically selected for each participant from the self-rating task. Participants were selected to participate in this study only if an idiographic not me attribute could be selected.

Then, on arriving to the laboratory for their session, participants completed a vivid imagery task in which they were randomly assigned to imagine one of three possible events. Participants were asked to listen to and vividly imagine a narrated audio scenario that involved them overhearing an interaction between their partner and a potential romantic rival. This task was adapted from the Articulated Thoughts in Simulated Situations paradigm (ATSS) procedure (Davison Robins & Johnson, 1983), which enables researchers to ethically expose participants to well-controlled but experientially impactful partner provocations (e.g., Costa & Babcock, 2008; Eckhart & Jamison, 2002; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Slotter et al., 2012). Participants listened to and were instructed to psychologically immerse themselves in simulated situations in which their partner engaged in behavior that varied in the degree to which it might be jealousy-provoking to the participant.

Participants were randomly assigned to listen to one of three audio scenarios in which their romantic partner aids a new transfer student in finding the student union building on campus. Each scenario starts by asking the participants to imagine they are meeting their partner for lunch on campus, but are running a few minutes late. As they make their way toward their partner they see and overhear their partner being asked for directions by an attractive individual who is always portrayed as being the same sex as the participant. In the neutral condition, the partner and the potential rival are cordial, but impersonal in their interaction. The partner provides the rival with directions and the rival thanks the partner. The partner then turns around and notices the participant who he/she rushes toward with a smile on his/her face. In the rival flirtation condition, the potential rival unabashedly flirts with the partner, despite the fact that the partner mentions being in a romantic relationship. The rival comments on how “cute” the partner is, even offering the partner his/her phone number for a future coffee date. During this flirtation, the partner remains cordial but clearly rebuffs the rival, again rushing toward the participant with a smile. In the partner flirtation condition, the partner unabashedly flirts with the rival, never mentioning being in a romantic relationship. The partner comments on how “cute” the rival is, even offering the rival his/her phone number for a future coffee date. During this flirtation, the rival remains cordial but unresponsive to the partner, and the partner trudges toward the participant with an annoyed look on his/her face.

After completing the vivid imagery task, participants viewed a personality profile that they were told was of the romantic rival in the scenario they just imagined. They were asked to imagine that this was the person who had asked their partner for directions. After receiving these instructions, participants viewed the profile of the romantic rival for 60 seconds. The profile contained a picture of a college-aged...
individual who was of the same sex as the participant. A male photo was presented to male participants, and a female photo was presented to female participants. Both photos were pre-tested to be equivalently and moderately physically attractive. In addition, the profile did include four personality traits that the rival had ostensibly self-described as possessing and four corresponding hobbies that the rival ostensibly enjoyed engaging in. Of the four traits/hobbies, one was the idiosyncratic not me attribute that participants had generated earlier in the study. The other three traits/hobbies were chosen to be attributes from the beginning of the study that the participants had rated as at least moderately characteristic of them (i.e., rating of 4-7). After viewing the potential rival’s profile information, participants completed a measure of state jealousy, the implicit self-task described below, as well as the self-rating task a second time.

Measures

Self-rating task. Participants rated a series of 10 attributes, taken from Anderson’s (1968) work on personality traits, with regard to the degree that each attribute was characteristic of their sense of self (1 = not at all characteristic of me; 7 = extremely characteristic of me; Slotter & Gardner, 2009, 2012). The attributes were neutral or mildly positively valenced, and included the following characteristics: athletic, artistic, musical, warm, intelligent, thoughtful, funny, enthusiastic, adventurous, and creative. Participants first completed this self-rating task at the pretesting session. Importantly, one idiosyncratic attribute was selected from participants’ self-ratings at the beginning of the study that they had rated as being “not characteristic of me” (e.g., a 1, 2, or 3). Thus, each participant generated an idiosyncratic not me attribute for use in the current study. If more than one attribute was rated as “not characteristic of me” the target not me attribute was randomly selected from the eligible set of attributes. As their data were collected at a prescreening session, only individuals who rated at least one attribute as not me were selected to participate in this study.

Participants completed the self-rating task a second time after viewing the potential romantic rival’s profile information, which included the idiosyncratic not me attribute. We were primarily interested in change in participants’ ratings of this attribute from the beginning of the study to after viewing the rival’s profile information, as a function of the experience they had imagined.

Implicit self-task. After viewing the target individual’s profile, participants also completed a validated reaction time measure to examine the certainty of their self-views (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009). This measure assessed reaction time delays in rejecting the not me attribute generated at pretesting and presented as characteristic of the romantic rival. As in previous research, slower response times to reject attributes that were characteristic of the rival, but not previously characteristic of the self, indicate greater difficulty in distinguishing between the participant’s own self-concept and the rival’s. This slower reaction is indicative of a shift in self-views to be more similar to the perceived rival. Participants indicated whether each of the 10 attributes was characteristic of their self-concept (1 = me, 0 = not me) and their response latencies were recorded. All participants correctly rejected the attribute and only one response was categorized as an outlier (±3 SD from the participant’s individual mean reaction time). This single outlier was deleted from the dataset.

Results and Discussion

Self-rating task. We first analyzed our self-rating task by conducting a mixed-factors ANOVA examining participants ratings of the idiosyncratic not me attribute as a function of when they rated the attribute (at the beginning of the study vs. after viewing the potential rival’s profile) and which type of experience they vividly imagined (neutral condition = 0; rival flirtation condition = −1; partner flirtation condition = 1).

As predicted, a significant interaction between when participants rated the attribute and their randomly assigned condition emerged (Figure 1), $F(1, 68) = 15.05, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .31$. Planned contrasts revealed that, in the neutral condition, participants’ endorsement of the idiosyncratic not me attribute did not change significantly from the beginning of the study ($M = 1.81, SD = .14$) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile ($M = 1.64, SD = .15$), $t(21) = 1.21, p = .21$. Similarly, in the rival flirtation condition, participants’ endorsement of the attribute did not change significantly from the beginning of the study ($M = 1.79, SD = .72$) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile ($M = 1.63, SD = .60$), $t(22) = 1.07, p = .30$. However, in the partner flirtation condition, participants’ endorsement of the idiosyncratic not me attribute increased from the beginning of the study ($M = 2.00, SD = .15$) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile ($M = 3.04, SD = .30$), $t(24) = 3.98, p < .001$.2

![Figure 1. Study 2: Endorsement of target attribute as a function of rating time and condition.](image-url)
emerged (Figure 2), *p*(1, 67) = 8.81, analysis. As predicted, a significant effect of condition participants’ mean reaction times to the other attributes in our −1; imagined (= 0; neutral condition = = 1,094.96, *M* = 1,178.45 ms, = 1,698.48 ms, *M* = 772.04) not part of their self-concept (= 772.04) Mpler flirtation condition took longer to reject the attribute as a function of condition. Thus, the rival when either no flirtation was occurring or the rival demonstrating that the flirtation behavior of the partner flirtation and neutral conditions did not differ from each other, *t*(44) = .79, *p* = .43. Taken together, the results from Study 2 demonstrated that individuals who have been asked to imagine their romantic partner flirting with a potential rival alter their self-views to be more similar to the rival than individuals who have been asked to imagine the rival flirting with their indifferent partner, or no flirtation whatsoever. These effects supported our hypothesis that individuals, due to their partner’s flirtatious behavior toward a potential romantic rival, would perceive themselves as being more similar to the rival that they believe their partner desires. Importantly, individuals did not seem to merely be engaging in self-presentational efforts. Our reaction time measure was an implicit measure that demonstrated individuals in the partner flirtation condition experiencing difficulty in rejecting attributes that were characteristic of the rival. In addition, the results from Study 2 demonstrated that the flirtation behavior of the partner, specifically, promotes increased similarity to the perceived rival. Individuals did not experience increased similarity to the rival when either no flirtation was occurring or the rival was the individual behaving in a flirtatious manner. Thus, individuals appear to be engaging in an intersexual mate retention attempt, aimed at keeping the partner rather than deterring a rival. A strength of Study 2 is that it examined shifts in individuals’ self-views rather than overall perceived similarity to a potential rival. In addition, we believe these effects to be particularly compelling in that they occurred when participants were privately imagining a scenario that had not actually taken place and when privately viewing a fake individual who they did not anticipate interacting with in the future on explicit and implicit measures.

**Studies 3a and 3b**

In Studies 3a and 3b, we expanded on the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by examining the role of state jealousy as a motivational mechanism that promotes individuals viewing themselves as more similar to a romantic rival. Thus, in these studies, we tested our complete theoretical model. Specifically, participants imagined their partner either expressing interest in a romantic rival or not. Participants then reported on their feelings of jealousy before viewing a personality profile, ostensibly of the rival. We predicted that individuals who imagined their partner expressing interest in a romantic rival would experience elevated levels of state jealousy and, thus, would alter their self-views to be more similar to the rival on specific characteristics. Novel to Studies 3a and 3b, we predicted that state jealousy would mediate the relationship between individuals imagining their partner flirting with a romantic rival, versus rebuffing the rival, and that these individuals would alter their self-views to be more similar to the rival they believe their partner to desire. In Study 3a, we examined our theoretical model among romantically involved nonstudent adults, whereas in Study 3b, we replicated the effects of Study 3a using similar methodology among romantically involved undergraduates. In Study 3a, we also sought to rule out an alternative explanation for our findings. Specifically, that simply viewing a rival as possessing positive attributes would be sufficient to prompt individuals altering their self-views, even if individuals’ partners do not express interest in the rival.

**Study 3a**

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 144 romantically involved individuals (87 women, 55 men, 2 unreported) who took part in the current study in exchange for US $0.50 monetary compensation. Participants were from a nonstudent sample recruited via Mturk (Buhrmester et al., 2011) and were 34.54 years old, on average (*SD* = 11.90, range = 19 - 71). All participants were in dating (*n* = 28), engaged (*n* = 22), or marital relationships (*n* = 94) that were an average of 88.83 months in length (*SD* = 105.9, range = 3 - 540).
Procedure. Participants completed all aspects of the study during a single online session. On arriving to the study’s website, participants first completed a measure of their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy, followed by the self-rating task used in Study 2. As in Study 2, a single not me attribute was idiosyncratically selected for each participant from the self-rating task. Participants only took part in this study if an idiographic not me attribute could be selected.

Participants next completed a vivid imagery task in which they were randomly assigned to imagine one of three possible events for 3 min. In the neutral condition, participants were asked to vividly imagine that they were walking through a shopping mall with their romantic partner when an attractive individual, of the sex the partner would be attracted to, walked by. This attractive other does not notice the partner, but after he/she passes, the partner says “Don’t you have that shirt? It looks much better on you than on him/her.” Thus, the romantic partner notices the potential romantic rival, but compares the participant favorably with him/her. In the partner flirtation condition, participants imagined the same situation; however, the partner instead says “Did you see that guy/girl? That shirt looked really hot on him/her.” Thus, the romantic partner not only notices the potential romantic rival but also expresses that he/she finds the potential rival physically attractive. In the other flirtation condition, participant imagined the same situation; however, he/she overhears a member of another couple (the same sex as their partner) say “Did you see that guy/girl? That shirt looked really hot on him/her.” Thus, participants overhear a favorable assessment of the potential romantic rival, which indicates that he/she possesses positive attributes, but the assessment is made by someone other than his/her partner.

After completing the vivid imagery task, participants viewed a personality profile for 60 seconds that they were told was of the romantic rival in the scenario they just imagined. They were asked to imagine that this was the person who had walked by. The profile paradigm used was identical to Study 2, with one exception. As this study was conducted online, we could not include a photo of the potential romantic rival in the profile that participants viewed; it was not possible to match the age of the participant, the age of the partner, and the age of the rival appropriately. After viewing the potential rival’s profile information, participants completed a measure of state jealousy as well as the self-rating task a second time.

Measures

Self-Rating task. Participants completed the self-rating task used in Study 2. They completed this task once at the beginning of the study and then a second time after viewing the potential rival’s profile information.

Dispositional jealousy. As in Study 1, participants completed an eight-item measure of their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy (Straus et al., 1999; α = .90; M = 4.55, SD = 1.53).

State jealousy. As in Study 1, participants completed a one-item measure of how jealous they felt during the interaction they had recalled (M = 3.33, SD = 2.16). Participants’ self-reports of state jealousy after recalling the interaction correlated with their reports of their dispositional tendencies to experience jealousy, Pearson’s r = .49, p < .01.

Results

Manipulation check. We first conducted a manipulation check to ensure that our randomly assigned conditions differentially impacted participants’ levels of state jealousy. Thus, we conducted an ANOVA predicting participants’ state jealousy from their randomly assigned condition (neutral condition = 0; other flirtation condition = −1; partner flirtation condition = 1). As predicted, a significant effect of condition emerged, F(1, 143) = 4.02, p < .05, partial η² = .05. Planned contrasts using independent samples t tests revealed that participants who had vividly imagined their partner being attracted to a passerby in a shopping mall reported higher levels of state jealousy (M = 4.02, SD = 2.30) than participants who had vividly imagined their partner dismissing a passerby in a shopping mall (M = 3.00, SD = 2.21), t(93) = 2.24, p < .05, or who had overheard another person’s partner (M = 2.94, SD = 1.90), t(96) = 2.54, p < .01. The neutral and other flirtation conditions did not differ, t(93) = −.15, p = .88.

Primary analysis. We next conducted a mixed-factors ANOVA to examine participants ratings of the idiographic not me attribute as a function of when they rated the attribute (at the beginning of the study vs. after viewing the potential rival’s profile) and which type of experience they vividly imagined (neutral condition = 0; other flirtation condition = −1; partner flirtation condition = 1).

A main effect of when participants rated the attribute emerged, F(1, 143) = 16.41, p < .001, partial η² = .10; however, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between when participants rated the attribute and their randomly assigned condition (Figure 3), F(1, 143) = 8.33, p < .01, partial η² = .11. Planned contrasts using paired samples t tests revealed that, in the neutral condition (M = 1.50, SD = .51; M = 1.65, SD = .88), t(45) = 1.27, p = .21, and other flirtation condition (M = 1.57, SD = .50; M = 1.65, SD = .78), t(48) = .94, p = .35, participants’ endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute did not change significantly from the beginning of the study to after viewing the potential rival’s profile. However, in the partner flirtation condition, participants’ endorsements of the attribute increased from the beginning of the study (M = 1.51, SD = .51) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile (M = 2.47, SD = 1.85), t(48) = 3.83, p < .001.

Mediation analysis. Extending on previous studies, Study 3a sought to investigate whether state jealousy might serve as
the motivational mechanism promoting participants’ changes in their self-views to be more similar to the potential rival in the severely jealousy-inducing condition. Specifically, we were interested in whether state jealousy would mediate the established relationship between condition and endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute after viewing the potential rival’s profile.

To test this hypothesized mediational pathway, we used techniques advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986), combined with a bootstrapping approach based. We effect coded condition (neutral condition = 0; other flirtation condition = −1; partner flirtation condition = 1) and standardized all continuous variables (M = 0, SD = 1) prior to analyses. We first established that our independent variable of condition predicted our dependent variable of participants’ endorsement of the attribute after viewing the potential romantic rival’s profile, controlling for their pretesting endorsement of the attribute, β = .33, t(143) = 3.64, p < .01. We next established that the condition predicted our proposed mediator of state jealousy, β = .25, t(143) = 2.50, p < .05.

Finally, we simultaneously entered condition and state jealousy into a regression predicting participants’ endorsement of the attribute after viewing the potential romantic rival’s profile, controlling for their pretesting endorsement of the attribute. When included simultaneously in the regression, higher levels of state jealousy significantly predicted participants’ greater endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute, β = .54, t(143) = 3.26, p < .01. Condition also remained a significant predictor of participants’ endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute, β = .27, t(143) = 3.00, p < .01. However, Preacher and Hayes’ (2004) SPSS macro for testing mediation using bootstrapping techniques revealed a total indirect effect of condition with a 95% BCa (bias corrected and accelerated) bootstrap confidence interval of .010 to .156 (based on 5,000 re-samples). Zero falls outside of this confidence interval, indicating significant mediation at the p < .05 level.

Figure 3. Study 3a: Endorsement of target attribute as a function of rating time and condition.

Study 3b

Method

Participants. Participants were 56 romantically involved, heterosexual undergraduates (35 women, 21 men) who took part in the current study in exchange for partial course credit. Participants were 18.69 years old, on average (SD = .76, range = 18 - 21). All participants were in dating relationships that were an average of 14.79 months in length (SD = 16.79, range = 1 - 95).

Procedure. Participants first completed the self-rating task, described below, at a pretesting session that took place prior to all laboratory sessions. As in Studies 2 and 3a, a single not me attribute was idiographically selected for each participant from the self-rating task. Participants only took part in this study if an idiographic not me attribute could be selected.

The jealousy manipulation used in Study 3b varied from the manipulation used in Study 3a. On arriving to the laboratory for their session, participants completed a vivid imagery task in which they were randomly assigned to listen to and imagine one of two possible events. Participants then were randomly assigned to listen to one of two scenarios designed to induce differential amounts of jealousy. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they had gone out to a local bar with their romantic partner, had gone to get drinks, and returned to find a potential romantic rival, of the sex their partner would be attracted to, flirting with their partner. In the rival flirtation scenario, the partner remained polite to the flirtatious rival but clearly rebuffed him/her in favor of the participant, stating that, after a year of dating, “things are really great, and I don’t see why that would change.” In the rival and partner flirtation scenario, the partner expressed clear romantic interest in the flirtatious rival, engaging in physical contact and claiming that, after a year of dating, “thing have definitely changed in the relationship, and sometimes I don’t know what I am doing still dating [the participant].” (Complete scenarios are available from the first author on request.) Similar to Study 2, this task was adapted from the ATSS paradigm (Davison et al., 1983). Participants listened to, and were instructed to immerse themselves psychologically in, simulated situations in which their partner engaged in behavior that varied in the degree to which it was jealousy-provoking to the participant.

After completing the vivid imagery task, participants viewed a personality profile that they were told was of the romantic rival in the scenario they just imagined for 60 seconds. The profiles displayed to participants were constructed and presented in an identical manner as in Study 2. After viewing the potential rival’s profile information, participants completed a measure of state jealousy, as well as the self-rating task a second time.
As predicted, a significant effect of condition emerged such that participants who had vividly imagined their partner expressing attraction (3a) to or flirtating (3b) with a potential rival experience more state jealousy and, in turn, alter their self-views to be more similar to the rival that they believe their partner desires. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between when participants rated the attribute and their randomly assigned condition (Figure 4), $F(1, 54) = 4.64, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Planned contrasts using paired samples $t$ tests revealed that, in the rival flirtation condition, participants’ endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute did not change significantly from the beginning of the study ($M = 1.96, SD = .66$) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile ($M = 1.96, SD = .99$), $t(25) = 0.1, p = .99$. However, in the rival and partner flirtation condition, participants’ endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute increased from the beginning of the study ($M = 1.97, SD = .76$) to after viewing the potential rival’s profile ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.20$), $t(29) = 2.99, p < .01$.

**Mediation analysis.** To test the hypothesized mediational pathway that emerged in Study 3a, we again used techniques advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986), combined with a bootstrapping approach. We effect coded condition (rival flirtation condition $= −1$; rival and partner flirtation condition $= 1$) and standardized all continuous variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) prior to analyses.

As in Study 3a, we first established that our independent variable of condition predicted our dependent variable of participants’ endorsement of the attribute after viewing the potential romantic rival’s profile, controlling for their pretesting endorsement of the attribute, $\beta = .33, t(53) = 2.57, p = .01$. We next established that the condition predicted our proposed mediator of state jealousy, $\beta = .35, t(54) = 2.73, p < .01$. Finally, we simultaneously entered condition and state jealousy into a regression predicting participants’ endorsement of the attribute after viewing the potential romantic rival’s profile, controlling for their pretesting endorsement of the attribute. As predicted, when included simultaneously in the regression, higher levels of state jealousy significantly predicted participants’ greater endorsement of the idiographic not me attribute, $\beta = .27, t(52) = 2.00, p = .05$, but condition fell to nonsignificance, $\beta = .20, t(52) = 1.47, p = .15$. Preacher and Hayes’ (2004) SPSS macro for testing mediation using bootstrapping techniques revealed a total indirect effect of condition with a 95% BCa bootstrap confidence interval of .009 to .212 (based on 5,000 re-samples). Zero falls outside of this confidence interval, indicating significant mediation at the $p < .05$ level.

Taken together, the results of Studies 3a and 3b again demonstrated that individuals who have been asked to imagine their romantic partner expressing attraction (3a) to or flirting (3b) with a potential rival experience more state jealousy and, in turn, alter their self-views to be more similar to the potential rival than individuals who have been asked to imagine their partner rebuffing the potential rival (3a and 3b) or another person’s partner expressing interest in the rival (3a). These effects supported our proposed theoretical model that posited that individuals, when motivated by jealousy due to their partner’s flirtatious behavior toward a potential romantic rival, would perceive themselves as being more similar to the rival that they believe their partner desires.

**Figure 4.** Study 3b: Endorsement of target attribute as a function of rating time and condition.

### Measures

**Self-rating task.** Participants completed the same self-rating task used in Study 2.

**State jealousy.** Participants completed the same one-item measure of how jealous they felt during the interaction they imagined as in Studies 1 through 3a ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.78$).

### Results and Discussion

**Manipulation check.** We first conducted a manipulation check to ensure that our two randomly assigned conditions differentially impacted participants’ levels of state jealousy. Thus, we conducted an ANOVA predicting participants’ state jealousy from their randomly assigned condition (rival flirtation condition $= −1$; rival and partner flirtation condition $= 1$). As predicted, a significant effect of condition emerged such that participants who had vividly imagined partner being attracted to a potential romantic rival reported higher levels of state jealousy ($M = 4.7, SD = 1.86$) than participants who had vividly imagined their partner dismissing the potential romantic rival ($M = 3.46, SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 55) = 7.45, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$.

**Primary analysis.** We next conducted a mixed-factors ANOVA examining participants’ ratings of the idiographic not me attribute as a function of when they rated the attribute (at the beginning of the study vs. after viewing the potential rival’s profile) and which type of experience they vividly imagined (rival flirtation condition $= −1$; rival and partner flirtation condition $= 1$).

A main effect of when participants rated the attribute emerged, $F(1, 54) = 4.63, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$; however, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between when participants rated the attribute and their randomly assigned condition (Figure 4), $F(1, 54) = 4.64, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Planned contrasts using paired samples...
General Discussion

Occasionally, individuals are likely to feel jealous of the attention or affection their romantic partner directs toward someone else (e.g., Scheikman & Werneck, 2010). When these individuals experience elevated feelings of jealousy, they have the option to engage in a variety of behaviors aimed at keeping their partner or deterring the perceived romantic rival (e.g., Buss, 1988). In the current research, we sought to investigate a novel way in which individuals might try to keep their partner in the face of a jealousy-inducing threat to the relationship: altering one’s self-views to be more similar to a romantic rival. Across three studies, we found evidence that perceiving their partner to be interested in another promoted individuals experiencing elevated feelings of romantic jealousy. In addition, we found that individuals were willing to alter their perceptions of themselves to be more similar to the romantic rival they perceived their partner to desire. Specifically, individuals perceived themselves to be more similar to the romantic rival overall (Studies 1), and even incorporated—explicitly (Studies 2, 3a/3b) and implicitly (Study 2)—specific characteristics of the rival’s self into their own self-views. Importantly, we also established that state romantic jealousy serves as a motivational mechanism in promoting increased perceived similarity to a rival, as the experience of romantic jealousy mediated the relationship between individuals perceiving their partner to be interested in a romantic rival and altering their self-views to be more similar to that rival (Studies 3a/3b). Across these studies, our findings supported our theoretical model. We demonstrated that perceiving one’s partner to be romantically interested in another person can promote individuals to experience jealousy and, due to this motivating force, alter their self-views to be more similar to the rival in an attempt to keep the interest and attention of their partner. These studies presented an especially conservative test of our theoretical predictions as individuals were incorporating attributes of rivals into their own self-concept based on the general perception that their partner was interested in the rivals rather than the perception that their partner was interested in the rivals due to the particular attributes the rivals possessed.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings from the current research expand our knowledge of the malleability of individuals’ self-concepts. The current work adds to the growing body of research that demonstrates that individuals are willing to change the way that they view their self-concepts, quickly and without the traditionally studied shared experience (e.g., Aron, 2003), when they are motivated to do so. Specifically, the current work establishes that romantic jealousy can serve as a motivational mechanism for self-concept malleability, demonstrating that motivations other than the desire to romantically affiliate with someone (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009; Slotter & Lucas, 2013) can promote changes in self-views. In some ways, one could view romantic jealousy as a sort of affiliative motivation: It encompasses the desire to keep the partner’s interest and attention. However, individuals did not view themselves as more similar to the partner, but rather viewed themselves as more similar to the rival who they believed possessed characteristics that their partner found attractive. Thus, the current work also establishes that romantic rivals can serve as the targets of self-concept malleability, demonstrating that individuals are willing to alter their self-views to perceive themselves as more similar to individuals other than romantic partners. In general, romantic rivals are not individuals that we often like, or want to affiliate with, so the finding that individuals were willing to view themselves as more similar to a rival when motivated by jealousy truly argues for a new dimension to our understanding of motivated self-concept malleability.

The findings from the current research also expand our knowledge of individuals’ responses to the experience of romantic jealousy. Previous work has contrasted individuals’ behavioral responses to jealousy into either intersexual strategies, which may include being kind to their partners or attempting to increase their partner’s commitment and are primarily aimed at keeping the partner, or intrasexual strategies, which may include being aggressive toward or derogating a perceived romantic rival and are primarily aimed at deterring the rival (e.g., Buss, 1988). In the current work, motivated self-concept malleability to be more similar to a romantic rival emerges as an intersexual strategy—aimed at retaining the partner rather than deterring the rival—as individuals altered their self-views to be more similar to a rival only when the partner expressed attraction to the rival. When the romantic rival expressed attraction to the partner, but the partner was unaffected by this flirtation, individuals did not alter their self-views. Thus, the partner’s behavior, not the rival’s, drove individuals’ motivated self-concept malleability. This suggests that individuals perceive themselves as more similar to a romantic rival when they perceive their partner to find that rival attractive, and thus that they may be losing their partner’s attention and affection.

In addition to these larger implications, the current research possessed the strengths of using varied methodology—ranging from recalling past relationship events to imagining hypothetical ones and using student and nonstudent samples. However, the current research possessed several limitations as well that may provide interesting avenues for future research. First, the current research examined motivated self-concept malleability primarily via fairly minimal laboratory paradigms. Although these paradigms successfully manipulated our key variables, and possessed the strength of strong experimental control, they give rise to two limitations. First, they do not allow us to examine the stability of individuals’ alterations to their self-views. Future research should endeavor to discern how long individuals’ changes to their self-views might last. We would hypothesize
that, in our hypothetical imagined scenarios, individuals do not maintain alterations to their selves long after leaving the laboratory. However, when faced with the actual experience of jealousy in their relationship, the motivation to maintain the changes to their self-views might result in more long-term self-concept malleability.

Second, the current studies do not allow us to investigate how individuals’ experiences of romantic jealousy might influence their self-views on an ongoing basis within the context of actual events in their relationships. Our first study examines individuals’ recollections of jealousy-inducing events in their relationships; however, future work should investigate how romantic jealousy might influence individuals evolving self-views over time in their relationships. For example, whether individuals experience sporadic or fairly chronic feelings of jealousy—due to actual or perceived flirtatious partner behaviors—could influence the extent and frequency with which they shift their self-views. Similarly, individual differences other than attachment anxiety, such as low self-esteem—which is associated with a host of maladaptive behaviors when confronted with relationship threats (e.g., Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998)—might influence the frequency with which individuals perceive a threat to their relationship and experience romantic jealousy.

Similarly, future research should investigate the consequences of self-concept malleability that is motivated by jealousy for the well-being of the relationship. The current research does not explore whether motivated self-concept malleability as a mate retention tactic would actually be successful in keeping a partner’s waning affections. Similarly, the current research does not explore the potential consequences of altering one’s self-views for the relationship more generally or for the individual. Conceivably, altering who one is in the attempt to keep a partner—especially if the alterations are in reaction to perceived rather than actual waning of the partner’s affection—might render an individual less attractive to his/her partner in that the individual may come to less resemble the person the partner started dating in the first place. In addition, experiencing high levels of jealousy may be detrimental to the relationship in more general or direct ways (Buss, 2000; Fleischmann, Spitzberg, Andersen, & Roesch, 2005).

The current research also does not explore the consequences of self-concept malleability that is motivated by jealousy for the individual. From the self-concept perspective, experiencing high levels of jealousy, which is a negatively valenced state, may also be detrimental to individuals’ psychological or physical well-being in more general or direct ways (e.g., Fleischmann et al., 2005).

In contrast, it is possible that altering the self to incorporate attributes that a partner desires leads to positive outcomes for the relationship or individual. If individuals take on attributes that their partner desires, their partner’s attention and affection for them may be reconfirmed, thus predicting positive outcomes for the relationship such as enhanced satisfaction. Similarly, the attributes investigated in the current research were neutral or mildly positively valenced. It is possible that incorporating positive attributes into the self would predict enhanced individual well-being. Perhaps altering the self to take on positive information could predict higher self-esteem or other positive well-being outcomes for individuals. Taken together, future research should endeavor to illuminate the long-term effects of self-concept malleability that is motivated by state romantic jealousy for the relationship and the individual.

Conclusions
In our romantic relationships, we will sometimes encounter situations that make us feel temporarily jealous of our partner’s interactions with a potential romantic rival. The current research demonstrates that, when such situations arise, we may alter the way that we view ourselves in an effort to make ourselves more similar to the rival that we feel is capturing the attention and affection of our partner. Like Legally Blonde’s Elle, we may try to embody the smart, serious individual that we perceive our partner to be attracted to over ourselves. When we feel our partner’s feelings for us are waning, the subsequent jealousy we experience is sufficient to promote us changing ourselves to keep the partner.

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Notes
1. In all studies presented in the current research, we ran a series of auxiliary analyses controlling for participant gender and all possible interactions between gender and our key variables. We conducted parallel analyses for relationship length. Neither participant gender nor relationship length contributed...
main effects to our analyses nor moderated the effects of state jealousy in any of the studies. In addition, our key effect of state jealousy remained either significant or marginally significant in all studies. Thus, gender and relationship length are not discussed further in the current research.
2. We also examined whether participants’ pretesting ratings of the target attribute differed. They did not.
3. Identical analyses were conducted controlling for participants’ dispositional tendencies toward jealousy. Dispositional jealousy predicted state jealousy in this analysis, but the effect of condition remained unaltered.
4. Dispositional jealousy was not assessed in Study 3b.

References

