

Change Over Time: Evaluating the Self, Close Other, and Acquaintance

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## Abstract

This experiment was designed to replicate and expand on Wilson & Ross' (2001) past-self derogation effect. This effect occurs when participants rate themselves less favorably in the past than in the present, but does not occur when participants rate acquaintances in the past and present. Moreover, the extent of the past-self derogation increases as perception of distance from the past increases, even if the objective distance from that time is held constant. Wilson & Ross hypothesize that this effect is used to maintain high self-esteem without over-inflating the view of the self in the present. The present study was designed to replicate Wilson & Ross' (2001) findings with the self and the acquaintance, and to examine whether there is a past derogation effect with close others (e.g. romantic partner, best friend), manipulating the perceived distance from an objective past time (3.5 months earlier). Results did not reveal a past derogation of any target, thus Wilson & Ross' findings were not replicated. Participants rated all targets equally in the past and the present, regardless of perceived distance from the past.

### Change Over Time: Evaluating the Self, Close Other, and Acquaintance

Wilson and Ross (2001) published a set of experiments in which they tested whether participants disparage their past selves in ratings they give based on their memories, what I term the “past-self derogation effect.” In this work they found that participants show a pattern of disparaging their past selves such that they see themselves as having improved over time. Wilson & Ross (2003) propose that this is a mechanism for maintaining self-esteem. If people attempt to build their self-esteem by increasingly seeing the self as better and better in the present, external forces will eventually disrupt that inflated ego by demonstrating that they are not as perfect as they believe. A bad evaluation on a project, an insult from a respected person, or a poor performance would disrupt the overly inflated self-esteem, making it impossible to rationally retain. To avoid this, Wilson and Ross suggest, we derogate our past selves, believing that we were less good in the past than we are now. Seeing improvement in ourselves over time allows us to see our own imperfections in the present, but simultaneously feel that we have grown and improved significantly, thus feeling good about our present selves. Wilson and Ross (2001) demonstrated the past-self derogation effect by asking participants in their study to rate themselves on 12 characteristics as they viewed themselves in the present and two months previous. They employed a manipulation of perceived distance, suggesting to some participants that two months was a very long time ago (“Think all the way back to the beginning of this term.”) and to other participants that two months ago was just in the recent past (“Now, take a moment to think of a point in time in the recent past, the beginning of this term.”). The results showed that participants in the recent past condition saw few changes in themselves since that time. That is, their ratings of past selves did not differ statistically from their ratings of present selves. In contrast, participants induced to feel that two months was a very long time ago saw

significant changes in themselves over the course of that time period. They rated themselves better in the present than in the past, demonstrating the past-self derogation effect.

To examine whether past derogation is exclusive to one's ratings of the self, Wilson & Ross (2001) asked participants to rate an acquaintance on the same 12 characteristics in the present and a time two months previous. They found that participants viewed acquaintances' traits as more stable over time, indicating a lack of past-other derogation. This finding supports their claim that past derogation is used to maintain present self-esteem: if we see significant improvements in our own character but no equivalent changes in the characters of others, our self-esteem benefits. In the same article, Wilson and Ross examined past-other derogation for siblings. There was some tendency for participants to see change in their siblings over time, but they found more dramatic changes in themselves than in their siblings. Siblings are assumed to be "closer others" than acquaintances, so it could be the case that they are more integrated into one's sense of self, thus producing derogation patterns more similar to those of the self. With this possibility in mind, the present study focused on a different type of close other: romantic partners and best friends. I hoped to discover whether the single person to whom we are closest is derogated equivalently to the self in the past, or whether that person remains separate from the self in this respect. Because the person to whom one is closest presumably reflects heavily on one's own personality, participants may be motivated to derogate this person in the past similarly to the way in which they derogate themselves.

There is reason to believe that close others might be integrated into our sense of self and self-esteem. This expectation emerges from a growing literature aimed at understanding the many different ways in which we integrate close others into our own identities (e.g. Andersen & Chen, 2002; Shah, 2003). The idea of the self as interpersonal can be traced all the way back to

William James (1890), who believed that the self could not be described as existing in a vacuum, but could only exist in relationship to others. In recent research on the nature of the self, Shah (2003) found evidence that participants valued various goals differentially and expended different amounts of energy pursuing those goals based on whether they were primed to think of various close others and their values. If participants were primed with the name of a close teacher, for example, they reported valuing academic pursuits higher and worked harder to achieve academic goals in the lab compared to when they were not primed. If they were primed with the name of an outgoing friend, they reported valuing social pursuits more highly and were more persistent and performed better on social tasks. This is evidence that we can take on and adapt in response to characteristic values of close others. In this way, these people affect our sense of self, differentially causing us to value certain goals.

Mashek, Aron, and Boncimino (2003) explored cognitive representations of close others. The researchers asked participants to rate themselves, a close other such as a romantic partner or best friend, and a distant other (e.g. a media personality) on several traits. All participants rated each target on different traits. For example, if they were asked about the close other's degree of shyness, they did not rate themselves or the distant other on shyness. In a surprise recognition task of the traits immediately following the ratings, participants were asked with whom each of the traits was paired. The findings demonstrated that participants made significantly more source errors between themselves and the close other than between themselves and the distant other. In other words, participants were more likely to confuse the traits on which they rated themselves and those on which they rated a close other than they were to confuse their own traits and traits for a distant other. These findings suggest that in some aspects, close others are cognitively

joined with one's self, causing participants to mistake things that are actually associated with a close other as being associated with the self.

Several other studies have demonstrated the integration of self and close others in various ways, including significant differences in the feeling of belonging to a group depending on the extent to which one integrates others into the sense of self (De Cremer, 2004) and differences in styles of self-other integration across cultures (Li, 2003). Andersen and Chen (2002) propose a "social-cognitive model of transference" in which the self is relational, affected by and linked to knowledge of close others. Situational cues trigger information about others, affecting transference of the other's traits to the self. They assert that the self is not a single construct, but rather, each person has a repertoire of "selves-with-significant-others" that are differentially prominent, based on the context in which the individual is present. Significant others are thus highly integrated into the sense of self and are inescapably linked to one's own changing perception of the self.

With this body of literature in mind, the present study was designed to determine whether Wilson & Ross' past-self derogation effect extends to the close other. I hypothesize that close others (i.e. romantic partners and best friends) will be derogated in the past similarly in the degree and manner in which participants derogate themselves, but that participants will show no past derogation of acquaintances. In addition, this study includes the manipulation of perceived distance, and I hypothesize that participants will derogate both themselves and close others more if they perceive the past time (3.5 months previous) to be relatively distant as opposed to less distant. As designed by Wilson & Ross (2001), each participant will rate themselves and one other (either an acquaintance or close other) on 12 traits, eight of which are positive (e.g. socially skilled) and 4 of which are negative (e.g. naïve). Given the inconsistent pattern of results that

Wilson and Ross (2001) found for the effects of trait valence on participants' willingness to derogate themselves, it is unclear whether positive and negative traits might lead to different effects.

In addition to the theoretical design from Wilson & Ross, this study included a measure of individual differences created by Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, and Geisinger (1995). Their survey, titled the "Ego Identity Process Questionnaire" (EIPQ) assesses two developmental constructs, "exploration" and "commitment." These constructs were adapted from Marcia's (1966) constructs of crisis and commitment, which he used to categorize people into four categories: diffused (low exploration, low commitment), foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment), moratorium (high exploration, low commitment), and identity achieved (high exploration, high commitment). Exploration (or crisis) measures the degree to which participants are seeking (or have sought) knowledge about their beliefs and values on eight domains (e.g. occupation, religion) and questioning those beliefs. Commitment refers to the degree to which they have resolved their conflicts on those topics and are committed to a particular set of beliefs. Mapping those constructs onto the present question of past-self derogation, there are intuitive reasons to believe that people who score differently on the EIPQ may be more or less prone to past derogation. Because they are actively seeking information about themselves, participants who score high in exploration are expected to be more prone to past-self derogation. They may be more likely to see changes in themselves. In contrast, those participants who are high in commitment should be less prone to past-self derogation because they have a solidly formed and stable view of themselves and their beliefs.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 80 students (18 males, 62 females) at Gustavus Adolphus College. Initial recruiting ( $n = 46$ ) was done through general psychology classes in exchange for extra credit. Secondary recruiting ( $n = 34$ ) was done in the principle college band and among psychology majors. Each experimental session included between one and nine participants.

### *Materials and Procedure*

Upon arrival, participants were handed a manila envelope containing the materials to be used in the experimental session. They first read and signed a consent form. To begin the experiment, they read instructions to choose someone that they knew, either a close friend/romantic partner or an acquaintance. Those in the close other condition were instructed to choose the person on campus to whom they feel closest, perhaps a best friend or romantic partner. Those participants who were in the acquaintance condition were instructed to choose someone on campus whom they knew casually, perhaps someone they had met in classes or an extra-curricular activity; the acquaintance they chose could not be their roommate. Participants were assigned to the close other or acquaintance condition based on the experimental session in which they arrived. Manipulation checks were to evaluate the extent to which participants followed these initial instructions. T-tests revealed that participants had known those they chose as close others longer than they had known acquaintances ( $t(72) = 2.54, p = .01$ ), spent more time with close others each week ( $t(78) = 6.12, p = .00$ ), and felt that the close others' behavior and personality reflected more on them (the participants) than did acquaintances' behavior ( $t(78) = -6.46, p = .00$ ). These findings indicate that participants followed the instructions when choosing the target other and that acquaintances were less well known than were close others.

Following the choice of the target other, each participant filled out four surveys adapted from Wilson & Ross (2001): one to answer about themselves in the present (April 2005), one



about themselves three months previous (January 2005), one about the other person they chose in the present, and one about their target other (acquaintance or close other) three months previous. The order of self and other surveys were counterbalanced to avoid order effects, although the “present” surveys always preceded “past” surveys. This order was chosen because the past derogation effects are by definition comparing the past self to the present self. A solid baseline of present characteristics is necessary to see whether participants rate the targets differently in the past than in the present. Each survey listed eight positive traits (independent/self reliant, satisfied with life, common sense, socially skilled, self-motivated, self-confident, serious about school, adapt well to new situations) and four negative traits (immature, conforms to others, naïve, narrow-minded). Participants were instructed to indicate on an 11-point scale the degree to which the target person exemplified each trait in comparison to peers his/her own age. The rating, therefore, was not an absolute statement about whether the target person did or did not display each trait, but rather was a judgment about how the target compared with peers at each point in time. Negative traits were reverse-scored prior to submission to analyses.

The instructions given in the surveys also included a manipulation of the perceived distance from the time about which the “past” surveys were completed. Although every participant answered the “past” traits about the same point in time (3.5 months previous), the instructions given (both printed on their sheets and read aloud) were meant to make participants feel that that time was either quite recent or rather distant. To induce the feeling of recency, participants were instructed to “think just back to the beginning of this year,” whereas the induction of a distant feeling was achieved with the instructions, “think *all the way* back to the beginning of 2005.” Half of the participants were in the recent condition, half were in the distant condition.

After completing the four Wilson & Ross surveys, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire to further examine the nature of the relationship between the participant and the target other they chose, the amount of time spent with that person, and the length of time they had known him or her. In the final stage of the session, all participants filled out the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, et al., 1995), which measures individual differences in commitment and exploration. At the end of the session, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

### Results

The primary questions of this study were: (1) whether participants show past derogation effects for the self, close other, and/or acquaintance; (2) whether perceived distance from the past affects the amount of derogation; and (3) whether trait valence affects the amount of derogation. To examine these questions, I computed the mean rating for the positive valence questions and the negative valence questions for each target and submitted these data to separate 2 (Time: present, past) X 2 (Perceived distance: distant, recent) X 2 (Valence: positive, negative) repeated measures Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for each target–self, close other, and acquaintance. Mean ratings can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean ratings of time, distance, and valence as a function of self and target other (close other, acquaintance)

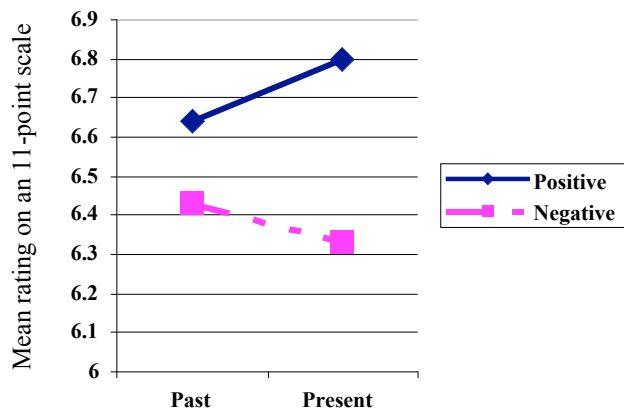
		Present	Recent	Distant
Self	Positive	6.80	6.52	6.75
	Negative	6.33	6.36	6.49
Close Other	Positive	6.79	6.67	6.57

	Negative	6.41	6.15	6.30
Acquaintance	Positive	6.43	5.78	6.73
	Negative	6.04	6.06	5.94

Note: Ratings were made on an 11-point scale (0-10) where high numbers indicate a greater presence of the characteristic being judged.

The analysis of the “self” condition revealed no main effects of time or distance and no significant interaction between the two variables ( $p > .05$ ). Thus, contrary to the findings of Wilson & Ross (2001), these analyses reveal no past-self derogation. There was a main effect of

Figure 1. Interaction of time and valence for ratings of the self



valence ( $F(1, 78) = 4.26, p < .05$ ) such that ratings for positive traits ( $M = 6.64$ ) were higher than ratings for reverse-scored negative traits ( $M = 6.43$ ). In addition, there was a Time X Valence interaction ( $F(1, 78) = 5.821, p < .02$ ) such that participants derogated themselves in the past on positive traits, but not on negative traits.

Analyses of the close other condition and the acquaintance condition revealed no main effects of time, distance, or valence ( $ps > .05$ ), and no meaningful interactions for either group.

To examine the data in more detail, traits were analyzed individually in separate 2 (Time) X 2 (Distance) repeated measures ANOVAs for the self, close other, and acquaintance to determine whether particular traits showed patterns of past-target derogation. Mean ratings of the targets for all of these analyses can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Means for present, recent past, distant past, and mean past for all traits

		Present	Past		
			Distant	Recent	Mean
Self	Independent/Self-Reliant	7.05	7.00	7.13	7.06
	Satisfied with Life	7.03	6.82	6.60	6.71
	Immature†	6.59	7.05	6.50	6.78
	Common Sense§	6.91	6.60	6.35	6.48
	Conform to Others†	5.80	5.58	6.15	5.86
	Socially Skilled*	6.40	7.12	5.85	6.49
	Self-Motivated	7.04	6.92	7.18	7.05
	Naïve†	5.96	6.43	5.78	6.10
	Self-Confident	6.35	6.25	6.38	6.31
	Narrow-Minded†	6.99	6.90	7.00	6.95
	Serious About School§	6.95	6.33	6.48	6.40
	Adapt Well to New Situations	6.66	6.95	6.18	6.56
Close Other	Independent/Self-Reliant	6.73	6.95	6.90	6.93

	Satisfied with Life*	6.93	6.10	6.90	6.50
	Immature†	6.53	6.10	6.05	6.08
	Common Sense	6.85	6.65	6.65	6.65
	Conform to Others†	5.95	5.85	6.00	5.93
	Socially Skilled	6.58	6.60	6.20	6.40
	Self-Motivated	7.40	6.95	7.20	7.08
	Naïve†	6.65	6.65	6.05	6.35
	Self-Confident	6.35	6.30	6.30	6.30
	Narrow-Minded†	6.53	6.60	6.50	6.55
	Serious About School	7.00	6.65	6.60	6.63
	Adapt Well to New Situations	6.53	6.35	6.60	6.48
Acquaintance	Independent/Self-Reliant*	6.98	7.20	6.20	6.70
	Satisfied with Life	6.25	6.40	6.25	6.33
	Immature†*	5.88	5.40	6.45	5.93
	Common Sense	5.98	5.90	5.60	5.75
	Conform to Others†	5.70	6.15	5.70	5.93
	Socially Skilled*	6.43	7.35	5.35	6.35
	Self-Motivated	6.88	6.90	6.25	6.58
	Naïve†	6.13	5.80	6.00	5.90
	Self-Confident*	6.70	7.30	5.95	6.63
	Narrow-Minded†	6.45	6.40	6.10	6.25
	Serious About School	6.15	5.95	5.40	5.68
	Adapt well to new situations*	6.13	6.80	5.20	6.00

\* Significant effect of distance at  $p < .05$

§ Significant effect of time at  $p < .05$

† Reverse-scored

For the self, “common sense” and “serious about school” showed main effects of time ( $F(1, 78) = 13.17, p = .001$ ;  $F(1, 78) = 8.29, p = .005$ , respectively), such that the past was rated lower than the present. “Socially skilled” revealed a main effect of perceived distance ( $F(1, 78) = 8.41, p = .005$ ), however, the means show that participants rated themselves higher in the distant past rather than the recent past. For the close other, “satisfied with life” produced a main effect of distance in the predicted direction ( $F(1, 38) = 4.18, p < .05$ ), with participants rating the other more highly in the recent past than in the distant past; there were no main effects of time. For the acquaintance condition, “independent” ( $F(1, 38) = 4.26, p < .05$ ), “immature” ( $F(1, 38) = 4.79, p < .04$ ), “socially skilled” ( $F(1, 38) = 8.01, p < .01$ ), “self confident” ( $F(1, 38) = 6.84, p = .01$ ), and “adapt well to new situations” ( $F(1, 38) = 8.12, p < .01$ ) all revealed main effects of distance, but only the effect for “immature” was in the expected direction. There were no main effects of time for acquaintance. In summary, no trait revealed a systematic pattern of significant results across targets. In fact, in many cases, the traits that showed effects of distance revealed those effects to be in the opposite direction than anticipated. That is, participants rated the target higher in the past if they perceived it to be rather distant, as opposed to rather recent.

#### *Individual difference analyses*

The final question of this study was whether individual differences in exploration and commitment are correlated with differential degrees of past derogation. Using the exploration and commitment data from the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, et al., 1995),

Pearson Correlations were run to assess individual differences in the tendency to see changes over time in the self and others. Exploration was not significantly correlated with any indicators of either past-self or past-other derogation. Commitment was positively correlated with the present-self ratings for positive valence traits ( $r = .228, p < .05$ ), and negatively correlated with the present-other ratings for negative valence traits ( $r = -.322, p < .01$ ). As commitment increased then, the tendency to rate one's present self highly on positive valence traits also increased, while the ratings of the present other (either close friend or acquaintance) decreased on negative valence traits. Because these were the only significant correlations between commitment and trait ratings, it is not possible to make any broad statements about the relationship between either exploration or commitment and the tendency to derogate either one's past self or past others.

### Discussion

The results of these analyses were unexpected. The hypotheses were largely meant to replicate the findings of Wilson & Ross (2001) that show past-self derogation, but not past-acquaintance derogation. The data collected in this study overall, however, did not demonstrate these findings. Unlike in Wilson & Ross (2001), in the present study, participants did not show a past-self derogation effect across valence, nor was there an effect of perceived distance from the past time. There was no effect of time for acquaintances or close others.

The main effect of valence on ratings of the self demonstrated participants' tendency to rate themselves better on positive traits than on negative traits, indicating that the two types of questions were treated differently. There was a time X valence interaction in which participants saw significant change in themselves over time on positive traits, but not on negative traits (see Figure 1). This indicates that for positive valence traits, participants did derogate themselves in

the past, seeing improvement over time. It is unclear why the effect was not also present for negative traits, as was the case in Wilson & Ross' (2001) study. The close other and acquaintance conditions did not show any evidence of derogation, indicating that this derogation only occurred for the self.

In an attempt to locate patterns with specific traits, the responses for each trait were analyzed to see if any effects of time or distance occurred. For each of the targets, various traits revealed main effects for either time or distance. For the self, results for "common sense" and "serious about school" indicate past-self derogation on those traits, but no other traits showed evidence of past-self derogation. There was an effect of distance for "socially skilled," but it was such that participants rated themselves better in the distant past condition than the recent past, the opposite of the predicted direction. For the close other, perceived distance affected ratings on "satisfied with life," indicating that participants felt their close others were much less satisfied with life in the perceived distant past compared with the perceived recent past. The most effects of distance occurred for the acquaintance condition, in which "independent," "immature," "socially skilled," "self confident" and "adapt well to new situations" were all significant. Of those traits, however, only the differences for "immature" were in the predicted direction. Despite these findings of significance, there were no systematic patterns such that one can interpret that particular traits produced important results across targets. In fact, each of the 12 traits was at least tending towards significance ( $p$ 's  $\leq .10$ ) for one main effect for one target person, but no trait showed consistent significance across groups nor did any show main effects of both time and distance.

Regarding individual differences, it was hypothesized that participants high in exploration would see more change in themselves over time than would participants low in



exploration. Participants high in commitment were expected to see less change in themselves than participants who were low in commitment. The correlations run on the data also refuted these hypotheses. No meaningful correlations were found for either exploration or commitment with past derogation effects. Because the main focus of this research—replicating Wilson & Ross' (2001) findings—did not occur, it is not clear whether exploration and commitment would correlate with past derogation if it had been found.

There are several possible reasons that this research did not replicate the findings of Wilson & Ross (2001). The most probable cause of the discrepancy is the unique situation in which the current participants were in at the time of the “past” they were asked to remember. Gustavus Adolphus College is based on a 4-1-4 calendar, using the month of January as a time for students to take a single course intensively, providing an opportunity for a different type of coursework and a different level of academic intensity. While admittedly anecdotal, it is commonly understood that most students are more relaxed and content during January term because of reduced academic demands and increased time for social and pleasurable activities. In an effort to replicate the timing used by Wilson & Ross, January was selected as the month to which participants were instructed to think back in the evaluations of the past target. If participants conceived of “January” as the month during which they had J-term, they might have remembered the past target in a more favorable light than is typical because of the generally pleasant nature of that month in both an academic a social sense. The instructions did nothing to induce participants to think of January in terms of the academic calendar rather than as a generic time three months previous, but it is conceivable that participants would have independently conceived of January as such. This tendency to remember the past time favorably may have interfered with participants' tendency to derogate their past selves. Whether this explanation is

adequate for explaining the present lack of a general self derogation effect merits further investigation. Future research could be done to ascertain how students working on the 4-1-4 calendar feel about themselves and their qualities during the more relaxed January term versus the normal semesters. If stress and busyness do play a role in the way that students rate themselves and others on these traits, there may also be differences in how students respond at various times during the semester. Additionally, future research should be done to more solidly test the main new question in this research: do participants derogate their closest other in the past as they do themselves, or do they treat that close other similarly to an acquaintance, failing to see change over time? Because this study did not replicate the more basic findings of a past-self derogation effect, the lack of derogation of a close other should not be considered conclusive. The discrepancy between Wilson & Ross' (2001) findings and those reported here should be resolved before accepting the current results as evidence of a lack of past-other derogation for close others. It is still plausible, given the research that exists demonstrating the integration of close others into one's concept of self, that they are treated more like the self than like acquaintances.

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