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From Chump to Champ: People's Appraisals of Their Earlier and Present Selves

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The authors present and test a theory of temporal self-appraisal. According to the theory, people can maintain their typically favorable self-regard by disparaging their distant and complimenting their recent past selves. This pattern of appraisals should be stronger for more important attributes because of their greater impact on self-regard and stronger for self-ratings than for ratings of other people. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that participants are more critical of distant past selves than of current selves, and Study 3 showed that this effect is obtained even when concurrent evaluations indicate no actual improvement. Studies 4 and 5 revealed that people perceived greater improvement for self than for acquaintances and siblings over the same time period. Study 6 provided support for the predicted effects of temporal distance and attribute importance on people's evaluation of past selves.

People's views of their lives seem to mirror the Bildungsroman, a form of novel in which the heroic features of the leading character emerge slowly over time (Buckley, 1974). Psychological research shows that people in our culture are quite impressed with their *current* traits and abilities, typically rating themselves as superior to a majority of their peers (Baumeister, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988). There is a dearth of research, but much anecdotal evidence suggesting that the same individuals who extol their present attributes are less dazzled by their earlier selves. For example at the age of 60, actor Mary Tyler Moore offered the following appraisal of herself (Gerosa, 1997, p. 83): "Of all the lives that I have lived, I would have to say that this one is my favorite. I am proud that I have developed into a kinder person than I ever thought I would be." Ruth Jacobs (1987) captured the inclination to derogate past selves in her poem, "Bag Ladies": "Bags of memories/tell us who we were/before we were wise" (p. 167). This combination of praising present and belittling past selves is intriguing, because today becomes yesterday. Apparently the current, extraordinary self appears less remarkable in retrospect.

Although our observations suggest that people are often less than impressed with former selves, research evidence is limited. Ryff (1991) asked young (mean age = 19), middle-aged (mean age = 46), and older (mean age = 73) adults to evaluate their current and past selves on several attributes (e.g., self-acceptance, personal growth, and positive relations with others). On all of the attributes, young and middle-aged adults rated themselves more favorably now than in the past. The results were more complicated for the older adults: They rated the present better, worse, and similar to the past, depending on the attribute. Moreover, the direction and magnitude of the difference between evaluations of past and present selves sometimes varied with the gender of these older participants. Similarly, Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) asked respondents ages 26–64 to rate themselves on a number of dimensions at their current age and in the past (age 20–25). Overall, younger participants reported mostly improvement with age, whereas older individuals reported improvement, decline, and stability on different dimensions.

In another relevant study, Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) examined happiness in a representative sample of adults (mean age = 46). Respondents typically reported that they were happier now than they were in the past. They expected to be even more contented in the future. Brickman et al. did not analyze their results according to the ages of the participants.

Finally, Woodruff and Birren (1972) found that individuals may retrospectively denigrate their earlier selves even when no real change is apparent. In the fall of 1944, Kimber (1947) administered a test of personal and social adjustment to 485 undergraduates. Twenty-five years later, Woodruff and Birren were able to locate and retest some of these individuals (N = 54) on the same personality measure. Participants displayed substantial stability over 25 years; their scores did not differ systematically in 1969 from the earlier results. Finally, participants were asked to complete the measure in retrospect, indicating how they thought they had responded in 1944. Participants retrospectively rated their former selves as significantly less well adjusted than they indicated currently or had reported originally in 1944.

Although modesty about the past may be widespread, it is not inevitable even among young or middle-aged individuals. People of all ages tell stories about their former glories, as well as about

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their past failings. We have recently proposed a theory of temporal self-appraisal, in which we describe psychological factors that lead people to retrospectively revise their evaluations of past selves upward or downward (Ross & Wilson, 2000). Beginning with the well-validated premise that individuals in our culture are motivated to think highly of themselves (Baumeister, 1998; Higgins, 1996; Sedikides, 1993), we propose that people tend to evaluate their past selves in a manner that makes them feel good about themselves now. We suggest that people can maintain their typically positive views of themselves sometimes by criticizing, and other times by enhancing their former selves. In the current article, we focus on conditions that lead people to derogate their earlier selves.[1]

We consider past selves to be akin to an interconnected chain of different individuals who vary in closeness to the current self. To understand the nature of the relationship between people's appraisals of a particular past self and their judgments of their present self, we turn to the literature on social comparison. If past selves are in some ways analogous to other people, then social comparison research should be relevant to present concerns.

The findings of Tesser and his colleagues are particularly pertinent (Tesser, 1980, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1982; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). They examined people's reactions to the achievements of their peers and pointed out the significance of two variables: the closeness of individuals to the successful persons and the relevance or importance[2] of the dimensions on which the achievements occurred. Increased closeness to a successful person enhances people's self-regard when the achievement occurs on a dimension that is unimportant to their self-definition. When the dimension is not central to their own self-view, people can bask in the reflected glory of the other individual. In contrast, people's self-esteem is threatened when a close friend or family member outperforms them on a dimension that is personally significant to them. Their own achievements pale by comparison. People use several psychological strategies to maintain their self-regard in the face of such invidious social comparisons. They may minimize the magnitude of the other person's achievement, downplay their closeness to the successful individual, or de-emphasize the significance of the dimension on which the accomplishment occurred (Tesser, 1988).

Just as upward social comparisons can threaten self-worth, downward comparisons to less fortunate individuals can sometimes enhance self-regard (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989; Wood & Taylor, 1991). According to Major et al., individuals benefit most from downward comparison to a less fortunate person, when that individual is similar or close to them and the dimension of comparison is relevant to them.

We consider the factors proposed by Tesser and Major and their colleagues (Major et al., 1991; Tesser, 1988) to be relevant to temporal comparisons, although our specific predictions diverge. We suggest that people's evaluation of a past self will depend, in part, on the closeness of that self. We use the term *closeness* to refer to people's judgments of the temporal distance between the present and an earlier self. This sense of nearness is often related to the passage of time. A 40-year-old man typically feels closer to his 39-year-old than to his 29-year-old self. The psychological experience of closeness can be affected, however, by factors other than actual duration. The literature on people's dating of past events suggests that feelings of closeness or distance from past selves should be fairly malleable and can be affected by a host of psychological factors. For example, the more detailed one's memory of an episode, the more recent it seems (Brown, Ripps, & Shevell, 1985). Although people typically recall recent events in greater detail than more distant events, encoding and retrieval factors influence the amount of information recalled and, therefore, people's estimates of temporal distance (Brown et al., 1985; Schacter, 1996). Temporal self-appraisal theory focuses on the psychological experience of temporal distance, rather than on the actual passage of time.

We expect that both the psychological closeness of a past self and the importance of the attribute being assessed will influence retrospective evaluations of the earlier self. The impact of closeness and attribute importance is likely to be different in temporal than in social comparison, however. When making social comparisons, people are threatened by the achievements of close others, particularly when the success occurs on important attributes. In contrast, a success by a recent (close) past self belongs almost as much to the present as to the earlier self and so, too, does a failure (Albert, 1977). If people's appraisal of recent, former selves directly affects their evaluation of their present selves, then they can maintain[3] high levels of current self-regard by emphasizing the worth of recent selves, especially on important dimensions. Presumably, unimportant attributes have fewer implications for current self-regard. Accordingly, individuals should be less motivated to emphasize the merit of recent selves on dimensions that are personally insignificant.

As perceived temporal distance increases, a favorable evaluation of a former self should be less likely to flatter, and an unfavorable evaluation should be less likely to taint the current self. Instead, individuals may benefit psychologically from criticizing a distant, earlier self, especially on attributes that are important to the present self. An inferior past self can serve as a downward comparison that helps people appreciate their current achievements (Greenwald, 1980; Wills, 1981; Wilson & Ross, 2000). Also, by evaluating former identities less favorably than current ones, individuals can judge themselves to be improving.[4] Albert (1977) proposed that,

[1] We use the term *derogation* in a relative sense. Earlier selves are belittled or criticized relative to current self. This does not imply that former selves are denounced to an extreme—they may simply be enhanced less than present selves.

[2] Tesser typically refers to *relevance* rather than *importance,* which he defines as the degree to which a dimension is self-defining. Self-relevance is often assessed by combining participants' assessments of how important the dimension is to them and how favorably they assess themselves on the dimension (e.g., Tesser & Campbell, 1982; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983). We use the term *importance* rather than relevance and separate self-assessment from importance assessment. Conceivably, one can value an attribute without rating oneself highly on it.

[3] We assume that comparisons to past selves typically help people to maintain or justify already high levels of self-regard. If self-worth has been threatened or lowered, however, comparisons to past selves may serve to boost current self-regard.

[4] We distinguish the *perception* of improvement from the *goal* of self-improvement. The perception of improvement over time can be rewarding and help people to maintain high self-regard. Revising the past in order to highlight a sense of improvement is motivated by the desire to feel good about oneself, rather than by the goal of self-improvement per se.

when examining their personal histories, individuals attend to evidence of improvement and selectively ignore indications of decline. Greenwald suggested that perceiving improvement, when no genuine improvement has occurred, may be likely when people evaluate their present attributes relative to their earlier traits. Just as advertisers creatively manipulate evidence to showcase constantly "new and improved" products, so too might individuals repackage and revise themselves to highlight improvement on important dimensions.

Past research suggests that people's tendency to compare with inferior past selves may be motivated by a desire to evaluate their current selves favorably. Individuals appear to make more temporal comparisons when they are motivated to feel good about themselves, rather than to assess themselves accurately (Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995); moreover, these temporal comparisons are likely to be with inferior past selves (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2000). In addition, correlationally, people who rate their current selves and relationships more favorably now than in the past tend to be more satisfied with their present state of affairs (Fleeson & Baltes, 1998; Karney & Coombs, 2000; Sprecher, 1999).

In previous studies, researchers have not examined the temporal distance of past selves or the importance of the target attributes. Temporal self-appraisal theory suggests that people will maintain self-regard by criticizing only distant former selves while continuing to praise recent ones. Moreover the amount of criticism and praise should be moderated by the importance of the attributes. Because motivational processes are more evident when people are highly invested in an outcome (Kunda, 1987; Miller, 1976), people should be more likely to flatter recent and deprecate distant former selves on attributes that they personally value.

According to the theory of temporal self-appraisal, people belittle their earlier selves if it makes them feel better about their present selves. However, factors beyond those described in temporal self-appraisal theory can play a role in people's criticism of their former selves. One straightforward explanation of the Brickman et al. (1978), Ryff (1991), and Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) findings is that people's perceptions of self-improvement (or lack thereof) are largely accurate. Individuals may track changes in themselves and judge their present self to be superior to previous versions only when it truly is. Another possibility is that people's recollections of past selves are constructions based on implicit theories of development that may or may not be valid. Within our culture, there is a generally shared conception that people get better with age on a host of traits, until late in their life span (Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993; McFarland, Ross, & Giltrow, 1992). When their memories of the attributes of past selves fade or are difficult to access, people may use their theories of development to infer their past standing on a personal attribute (Ross, 1989). Until they are quite aged, individuals may suppose that they must have improved, because theories of development suggest that most people do.

Individuals may also obtain information over time that leads them to disparage their past qualities. They may discover, for example, that the outcomes of their earlier actions were not as favorable as they had anticipated. Disillusionment of this sort is probably common, because people are often too optimistic about their futures (Armor & Taylor, 1998; Ross & Buehler, 2001). Along these same lines, hindsight biases may lead people to criticize the actions of their earlier selves (Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975).

Such interpretations explain only some of the variance in temporal appraisals, and our model yields predictions that are not accounted for by the competing explanations. Temporal self-appraisal theory predicts that people will derogate distant past selves even in the absence of actual improvement. It also generates different predictions than does an implicit theories approach. An explanation that invokes culturally shared, implicit theories of development should predict that people will perceive others as improving to the same degree as themselves; in contrast, temporal self-appraisal theory suggests that people should be motivated to perceive greater change in themselves. Moreover, although a variety of mechanisms (e.g., hindsight bias and unrealistic optimism) may make it seem inevitable that people will derogate their past selves, the theory of temporal self-appraisal specifies variables that moderate this effect. People should be particularly disposed to deprecate distant past selves and should do so especially on qualities that they consider important. The hypotheses involving distance and importance help distinguish temporal self-appraisal theory from other plausible interpretations of a tendency to criticize earlier selves.

Overview of Present Studies

Our first goal was to establish that people tend to evaluate distant past selves more negatively than current selves. The Brickman et al. (1978), Ryff (1991), and Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) studies provide some support for this hypothesis, but the findings are limited to a few attributes and are readily interpreted as reflecting actual change. In Studies 1–3 we used a variety of methodologies and dependent measures to demonstrate that participants derogate distant past selves and to investigate the possibility that such derogation simply reflects actual improvement with age. In Studies 4 and 5, we examined whether individuals derogate other people's past selves, as well as their own. If disparagement of past selves primarily reflects the impact of culturally shared, implicit theories of development, then individuals should criticize other people's past selves to the same degree as their own. In contrast, if derogation is motivated by a desire to maintain self-regard, then people should derogate their own pasts more than others'. In Study 6, we assessed the impact of apparent temporal distance on people's evaluations of earlier selves on personally important and unimportant traits. We manipulated apparent temporal distance while holding actual distance constant. We expected greater denigration of psychologically distant past selves on important attributes.

Study 1

In the first study, we attempted to show that individuals depict a past self more negatively than their present self when they describe both selves in a relatively unconstrained fashion. University students provided open-ended descriptions of themselves as they are now and as they recall being at age 16. We chose a comparison age of 16 as a psychologically distant past self for undergraduate students. This age would precede their transition to university. The mean age of participants was 19.6 years. We

expected participants' portrayals of their current selves to be more favorable than their depictions of their earlier selves.

In both descriptions, we asked participants to compare themselves to age-relevant peers. Temporal self-appraisal theory suggests that people criticize past selves in order to maintain high levels of current self-regard. If so, the perception of change and development should be greater for self than for others. Perceiving improvement in others would not enhance self worth and might even undermine it. One's own achievement is hardly remarkable if most people exhibit the same development. On the other hand, if participants' appraisals are guided by culturally shared theories of development, then they may perceive their peers as improving at the same rate as themselves. They may then not judge themselves to be any better now, relatively speaking, than they were in the past.

Method

Participants. Twenty-six University of Waterloo students (13 women and 13 men) participated individually in this study for partial fulfillment of a psychology course credit or for $5. The data from 1 participant were lost because he failed to operate the tape recorder correctly.

Procedure. Participants were invited to take part in a study about people's descriptions of themselves over time. They were seated at a table in their own lab room and were provided with written instructions and a tape recorder. Emphasizing that participants' responses would be anonymous and confidential, the experimenter left them alone to respond to the questions. Respondents were asked to turn on the tape recorder and describe themselves in their own words, as they are now and as they were at the age of 16. They were instructed to describe what they were like generally as a person in comparison to other people in the relevant age group (16 or current age). Half of the sample described themselves first at 16 and then now; the other half described their present and past selves in the reverse order. Although students knew they would be asked to portray themselves over time, they did not know in advance the particular ages they would be asked to describe. After participants had finished describing themselves at both ages, they were instructed to listen, in private, to their self-descriptions. They evaluated, in writing, each of their statements according to whether it stated something positive, negative, or neutral about themselves at the relevant age. An independent observer also scored the favorableness of each statement. Analyses of participants' and the observer's ratings yielded statistically identical findings; we report only participants' self-evaluations.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects for order of evaluating past and present selves (past first vs. present first), and this variable is collapsed in the analyses reported here. As predicted, people's descriptions of their present selves were more favorable than their portrayals of their past selves (see Table 1). The total number of positive, negative, and neutral statements, as rated by participants, was submitted to a Time (past vs. present) × Valence (good vs. bad vs. neutral) repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA).[5] A significant main effect of valence, $F(2, 48) = 12.54$, $p < .001$, was qualified by a Time × Valence interaction, $F(2, 48) = 4.63$, $p < .015$. Participants rated more of their present than past self-statements as favorable, $t(24) = 2.02$, $p < .054$, and fewer as negative, $t(24) = 3.09$, $p < .005$. The number of neutral statements did not shift over time, $t(24) < 1.0$. Participants' statements about their present selves were much more likely to be complimentary than derogatory, $t(24) = 6.36$, $p < .001$; in contrast, they were as likely to criticize as to flatter their 16-year-old selves, $t(24) = 1.15$, $p < .26$. The tendency to self-enhance, though strong in the present, was significantly diminished when participants were asked to characterize a former self.

Table 1
Mean Frequency of Positive, Negative, and Neutral Statements in Participants' Open-Ended Self-Descriptions (Study 1)

Self	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Past[a]	2.84	2.16	1.28
Present	3.80	1.28	1.52

[a] Past self at 16 years of age.

Study 2

In Study 1 we examined people's narrative descriptions of themselves. This approach has the advantage of allowing people to describe the aspects of themselves that they deem to be personally relevant and important and that has ecological validity. The methodology has limitations, however. Conceivably, participants selectively reported aspects of themselves on which they truly had improved relative to their peers since the age of 16. To render such differential focus more difficult, we used closed-ended scales in the second study and asked participants to evaluate their past and present selves on a list of desirable and undesirable attributes. As in the prior study, they evaluated themselves relative to age-relevant peers. We included both university students and middle-aged participants in the study to assess the generalizability of the findings. It was important to demonstrate that the perception of improvement through time is not limited to young adults.

Method

Participants. Introductory psychology students were asked if they would be willing to allow the researcher to contact their parents and invite them to complete a short questionnaire study on how people see themselves through time. If the students agreed, they were also invited to participate in the study themselves. Students nominated which parent should be asked and were given the option of contacting them first to let them know they had agreed to the recruitment. Parents were then telephoned by the researcher who asked if they were willing to have materials mailed to them. If they accepted, a questionnaire was mailed along with a self-addressed, stamped, return envelope. Thirty-five students (mean age = 20.1 years) agreed to participate and to let us contact their parents. All parents initially agreed to participate over the phone. Twenty-seven parents (23 mothers and 4 fathers) returned the questionnaire. Parents' ages ranged from 43 to 60, with a mean of 49.5 years.

Procedure. Student participants reported to the psychology department to complete the questionnaire in groups of one to four. Parents completed the questionnaire at their convenience and returned it in the mail. Participants were asked to evaluate themselves, relative to other people of the same age, on five desirable attributes (broad minded, common sense, self-confident, good coping skills, and socially skilled) and three undesir-

[5] The findings in all of the studies are presented collapsed across gender, because there were no significant interactions with gender that qualify the effects reported.

able attributes (dishonest, rude, and dull/boring). They indicated the relative degree to which they possessed each attribute on 11-point scales in which responses ranged from 0 (*much less than most*) to 5 (*same as most*) to 10 (*much more than most*). All participants assessed themselves now (at their current age), and at age 16, relative to their same-aged peers. Two other points were "personalized" for the parents. Parents were asked to rate themselves at the age that their child currently was (M = 20.1) and at the midpoint between the parent's and student's age (M = 34.9). For example, a 49-year-old mother with a 19-year-old daughter would rate herself at ages 16, 19, 34, and 49. Ages were calculated and specified by the experimenter so that parents were presumably unaware of the meaning behind the specific ages. Participants evaluated themselves in one of two orders: beginning either with the youngest self and proceeding to older selves or beginning with current self and working downward in age.

Results

Preliminary analyses on the responses of parents and students revealed no significant effects for order of evaluating past and present selves. This variable is collapsed in the analyses reported here. Because of the different ages assessed, we analyzed the parent and student data separately.

Parents. A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted on the mean of the desirable and undesirable (coded in the positive direction) attributes with time (16 years vs. child's age vs. midpoint age vs. current age) and valence of attributes (desirable vs. undesirable) as variables. The analysis revealed a main effect of time, $F(3, 78) = 9.77$, $p < .001$, and a significant Time × Valence interaction, $F(3, 78) = 14.05$, $p < .001$. Simple main effects analyses indicated that the time main effect was significant for desirable, $F(3, 78) = 32.95$, $p < .001$, but not for undesirable traits ($F < 1$). Parents viewed their relative standing on desirable attributes as steadily improving with age (Ms = 5.87, 6.67, 7.21, and 7.47 from age 16 to current age). However, they rated their undesirable traits as relatively consistent over time (Ms = 6.47, 6.57, 6.70, and 6.62 from age 16 to current age). At each point in time, parents rated themselves as significantly above the midpoint of the scale (5 = *same as most*), and therefore as better than most of their same aged peers; ts(26) > 3, ps < .01.

University students. Students' mean self-ratings for the desirable and undesirable attributes (recoded in a positive direction) were submitted to a repeated-measures ANOVA with time (16 years vs. current age) and valence of attributes (desirable vs. undesirable) as variables. The analysis revealed a main effect of time, $F(1, 34) = 17.81$, $p < .001$. The main effect for valence was not significant ($F < 1$), and the Time × Valence interaction approached but did not reach significance, $F(1, 34) = 2.66$, $p < .11$. We analyzed desirable and undesirable traits separately to maintain consistency with the parent results reported previously. On desirable attributes, students rated themselves less favorably at 16 than they did at their current age, $F(1, 34) = 14.44$, $p < .001$, Ms = 5.78 and 6.50, respectively. For undesirable attributes, students indicated that their 16-year-old selves were marginally less favorable than their current selves, $F(1, 34) = 3.95$, $p < .055$, Ms = 5.98 and 6.30, respectively. Students judged themselves to be significantly above the midpoint of the scale at both times (ts(34) > 4, ps < .001) and consequently as better than most of their peers.

Discussion

As in the first study, participants rated distant past selves as inferior to present selves. The open-ended findings of Study 1 were replicated using a closed-ended format, and extended to both university students and their middle-aged parents. The results from the parents demonstrate that individuals need not look back on younger, shorter, more acne-ridden versions of themselves at age 16 to find fault with their former incarnations. Parents viewed themselves as improving steadily with age on the desirable attributes. Note that neither students nor parents in the current study reported that their past selves were horrible—they evaluated themselves as better than average at every age—but they did judge their former selves to be inferior to their present selves. Moreover, the parent data provide preliminary support for the temporal distance prediction of temporal self-appraisal theory. Past selves were rated less favorably as the distance from current self increased. It is unclear why the effect of temporal distance seemed to be stronger on desirable traits. Note, however, that we failed to find a difference resulting from the valence of the traits in any of the subsequent studies.

Study 3

In the first two studies, participants described their earlier selves less favorably than their current selves. We interpret this result to indicate a reevaluation of selves that were once regarded more favorably. Conceivably, however, the retrospective assessment accurately reflects how participants viewed themselves when they were younger. Perhaps even concurrent evaluations would reveal that individuals perceive themselves as increasingly better than average as they age. The results of Study 2 provide suggestive evidence that people's self-views improve with age. Middle-aged parents appeared to rate their current selves more favorably, relative to their peers, than did their university student children.

In Study 3, we used a different measure of self-evaluation to address this issue directly. We compared university students' evaluations of themselves at the start of the school year to their recollections of their beginning-of-the-term selves obtained about 2 months later. This study constitutes a conceptual replication of Woodruff and Birren's (1972) research, but we used a much shorter time frame than they did (2 months vs. 25 years). In the current study, however, participants evaluated their former selves in retrospect (i.e., from their current perspective), rather than as they think they would have rated themselves at the earlier point in time (Woodruff and Birren's instructions). Participants also assessed themselves relative to their peers of the same age. In is unclear from the Woodruff and Birren study whether participants would have judged their own improvement to be superior to that of their peers.

In summary, we sought to determine, in a longitudinal study, whether people who thought highly of themselves at the first assessment would lower their evaluations in retrospect. Although this is a short time period for such retrospective derogation to occur (especially as compared with our earlier studies), we anticipated that the beginning of the term would seem temporally remote to students a couple of months later as they rush to complete assignments and prepare for exams. Students could experience the beginning of the term as psychologically distant, even though it is quite recent in actual time.

Method

Participants. Twenty-eight participants (24 women and 4 men) completed this study for partial course credit in their introductory psychology class. Mean age was 19.4 years.

Procedure. The initial self-rating questionnaire was included in a questionnaire distributed to introductory psychology students during the first 2 weeks of the fall term (mid-September). Participants rated themselves, relative to same aged peers, on the degree to which they possessed seven desirable attributes (socially skilled, self-confident, independent/self-reliant, adapt well to new situations, serious about school, self-motivated, and satisfied with life) and three undesirable traits (narrow minded, immature, and naive) on 11-point scales in which responses ranged from 0 (*much less than most*) to 5 (*same as most*) to 10 (*much more than most*). They were instructed to indicate their current standing (within the past 2 weeks) on these dimensions.

Two months later (mid to late November), students completed a second questionnaire for partial fulfillment of course credit. Respondents first rated their current selves (within the past 2 weeks) on the same items they had evaluated in September. They were next asked to remember themselves within the first 2 weeks of the term and to rate their former selves on the identical attributes.

Results

Mean self-ratings on the desirable and undesirable attributes were calculated for each time period rated by participants (September present, November present, and September retrospect). Responses to undesirable trait items were recoded in the positive direction so that higher ratings indicated more favorable evaluations. A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with Time (September present vs. November present vs. September retrospect) × Valence (desirable vs. undesirable) as variables. The analysis revealed only a main effect of time, $F(2, 54) = 7.84$, $p < .001$. Because the valence main effect and Time × Valence interaction were nonsignificant (Fs < 1), desirable and undesirable traits were collapsed for planned comparisons. Although students' current self-ratings declined slightly over the 2 months, they retrospectively deprecated their September selves. Participants' retrospective ratings of themselves in September ($M = 5.74$) were significantly lower than both how they had actually rated their current selves in September, ($M = 6.35$), $t(27) = 3.64$, $p < .001$, and their current November evaluations ($M = 6.05$), $t(27) = 2.32$, $p < .028$. Instead of reflecting any evidence of genuine improvement, students' current self-ratings (September present and November present) actually showed a marginal decline over the 2 months of the school term, $t(27) = 1.72$, $p < .097$. Finally, all ratings were significantly above the midpoint of the scale, designated "same as most" (all ts[27] > 5.0, ps < .001). Participants considered themselves to be somewhat superior to most of their peers even in their less favorable, retrospective self-evaluations.

Discussion

In the academic context at least, 2 months was sufficient time to produce derogation of past selves. Study 3 also suggests that denigration of earlier selves can occur in the absence of actual improvement. Perhaps because of the stress associated with rapidly approaching exams, participants were somewhat more critical of their present selves in November than in September. Although students' *current* self-views declined slightly, their retrospective derogation of their September selves creates the illusion of significant improvement in just over 2 months.

Studies 1–3 provide evidence that individuals derogate their past selves relative to their current selves. Temporal self-appraisal theory suggests that people criticize past selves in order to maintain their favorable views of their current selves. If so, the perception of change and development should be greater for self than for others. An alternative interpretation of the findings is that individuals' assessments of their past and present selves are guided by the belief that many people of their age improve on a host of attributes over the specified time periods. If so, their self-judgments may simply reflect this general theory and may parallel the judgments they would render for other people. Although people may see themselves as generally superior to others, they may nonetheless perceive others as improving over time at about the same rate as they themselves do.

We attempted to address this issue at the dependent measure level in the first three studies by requiring participants to judge their past and present selves against age-appropriate peers. Logically, most people cannot improve relative to their peers over time. Conceivably participants are not thinking in relative terms, however, despite the response scale. There is evidence that people's comparative judgments may be largely self-focused (Klar & Giladi, 1997; Kruger, 1999); consequently, the perception that one has improved may be interpreted, ipso facto, to mean that one has improved relative to others.

In Studies 4 and 5, we directly examined the hypothesis that people would report more change for self than for others over the same time period. In Study 4, university students rated either themselves or an acquaintance now and as they were at the beginning of the academic term on traits similar to those used in Study 3. In Study 5, we examined participants' evaluations of very distant selves. Adult siblings rated each other's ability to avoid and resolve conflicts both now and during their childhood. In both contexts, we expected participants to report more improvement in themselves than in the other people.

Study 4

Method

Participants. Forty students (17 women and 23 men) were approached at various locations on campus and were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire. Participants were offered their choice of a pen or an individually wrapped candy in appreciation for their help. Everyone chose the candy.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to rate either themselves or an acquaintance. In the acquaintance condition, participants were asked to think of a student in their own year at the University of Waterloo whom they had known at least since the beginning of the term and who was not a best friend or romantic partner. Participants specified the target individual before knowing what kinds of judgments they would make about the person.

Participants were first asked to rate either themselves or their chosen acquaintance according to what they were like now, within the past 2 weeks. They rated themselves or their acquaintances on the scales and traits described in Study 3 (with the addition of one more desirable trait, common sense, and one more undesirable trait, conform to others). They were next asked to think about the first 2 weeks of the term and to rate what they (or their acquaintances) were like then on the same attributes. All 40 students participated in this study at the very end of the school term. They were reflecting on a past self or acquaintance of about 3½ months earlier.

Results and Discussion

The mean evaluation on the desirable and undesirable attributes was obtained for each set of assessments. The ratings of the undesirable attributes were recoded in a positive direction. As predicted, participants reported more change in themselves than in acquaintances. Analyses including valence (desirable vs. undesirable attributes) as a variable revealed no significant effects for valence; thus, all items were aggregated and submitted to a Time (present vs. beginning of the term) × Person (self vs. acquaintance) mixed ANOVA. Analyses revealed a main effect of time, $F(1, 38) = 6.42$, $p < .016$, qualified by a Time × Person interaction, $F(1, 38) = 9.70$, $p < .003$. Means can be found in Table 2. People evaluated themselves significantly more favorably now than they recalled being at the beginning of the term, $F(1, 19) = 19.0$, $p < .001$. In contrast, they rated their acquaintances virtually identical in the past and present, $F(1, 19) < 1$. Participants judged themselves to be a little better than their acquaintances now and a little worse in the past, but neither of these differences between ratings of self and acquaintance attained statistical significance, $t(38) = 1.02$, $p < .32$, $t(38) = .52$, $p < .61$, respectively. Finally, participants rated themselves and their acquaintances as better than average at all points in time ($ts[38] > 3.6$, $ps < .001$).

The results do not support the hypothesis that people's self-appraisals are guided by a general belief that everyone improves over time. Consistent with the theory of temporal self-appraisal, participants reported more improvement in themselves than in others.

Study 5

The results of Study 4 demonstrated that students report significant improvement in themselves over a 3-month period but judge acquaintances to remain unchanged. Does this finding suggest that people see only themselves as improving over time? The previous study covered a brief period of time. We expect that for longer time periods, for which people hold strong beliefs that most people improve with age (Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993; Ryff, 1991), individuals will perceive development in others as well. However, temporal self-appraisal theory predicts that people will still report their own rate of improvement to be greater than that of others.

In Study 5, we asked pairs of siblings to assess their own and their sibling's current or recent conflict resolution skills and conflict behaviors (within the past year) and their skills and behaviors in the distant past (when they were age 12 and younger).[6] We determined in a pretest conducted with a different group of university students that individuals believe that the ability to avoid and successfully resolve sibling conflicts improves significantly with age. In the actual study, we expected that both members of the sibling pairs would report improvement over time in line with these theories of development, but that both would also report greater self than sibling improvement.

Table 2
Ratings of Self and Acquaintances in the Present and Past (Study 4)

Time period	Self	Acquaintance
Past	5.80	5.96
Present	6.25	5.91

Note. Higher numbers indicate more favorable ratings.

Method

Participants. Students who were interested in participating in the study and who reported that they had a sibling within 5 years of their current age were recruited from classes at the University of Waterloo. Student participants put the researcher in contact with their off-campus sibling. One hundred and thirteen pairs of siblings agreed to participate in this study; complete data were obtained from 108 pairs. Fifty-eight percent of on-campus siblings were older, and 42% were younger than the off-campus sibling. Younger siblings ranged from age 15 to 45 ($M = 20.4$), and older siblings ranged from age 19 to 49 ($M = 23.1$). There were 31 male–male sibling pairs, 35 female–female pairs, and 42 male–female pairs. Each sibling received $5 for participating.

Procedure. On-campus siblings completed the questionnaire in a laboratory in the psychology department. Off campus siblings were given the option of completing the questionnaire at the university or having it mailed to their home, with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. The return rate for the mailed questionnaires was 93%.

Participants completed a 72-item questionnaire consisting of 18 questions about themselves in the present and recent past (within the past year), and the same 18 questions about their sibling. The same questions were also asked about self and sibling in the past while they were growing up (up to age 12). Order of self/other and past/present was counterbalanced across dyads and constant within dyads. Embedded in each of the 18 questions were nine items assessing sibling conflict behaviors and conflict-resolution skills. The wording of the items changed to reflect whether participants were rating themselves or their sibling and whether the rating referred to the present or while they were growing up. The items included the following: (a) Currently, I often act mean to my brother/sister (worded for self in the present): (b) When we were growing up, I frequently started arguments with my brother/sister (worded for self in the past): (c) Currently, my brother/sister can resolve any problem he/she encounters in our sibling relationship (worded for sibling in the present): (d) When we were growing up, if my brother/sister and I disagreed, my sibling always tried to show me that he/she understood my point of view (worded for sibling in the past). Participants indicated their degree of agreement with each item: responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The analyses reported in the following paragraph were conducted only on the conflict items. The other nine questions were related to commitment, satisfaction, and trust in the relationship. These items do not clearly distinguish self and other assessments (e.g., my level of trust says as much about my sibling as it does about myself) and are irrelevant to present concerns.

Results

Responses to negatively worded questions were recoded in a positive direction. Items were then aggregated to form a measure of conflict behavior at each time period. Higher scores indicated more positive conflict behavior and problem-solving skill. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the aggregated conflict scale was substantial, averaging .85 for self measures and .87 for sibling

[6] We thank Christine Celnar for collecting these data as part of her undergraduate honor's thesis.

measures.[7] Preliminary analyses with order and gender of dyads as variables revealed no significant effects that qualified the overall pattern of results.

Participants' ratings were submitted to a Time (present vs. past) × Target (self vs. other) × Sibling (older vs. younger) repeated-measures ANOVA. A main effect of time indicated that respondents saw considerable improvement in conflict behavior over time, $F(1, 107) = 304.13$, $p < .001$ (Ms = 3.59 in the past and 5.39 currently). However, a Time × Target interaction, $F(1, 107) = 33.22$, $p < .001$, revealed that overall, both older and younger siblings reported greater change from past to present for themselves (Ms = 3.53 and 5.50, respectively) than for their sibling (Ms = 3.66 and 5.23, respectively). In fact, although participants reported themselves to be better than their siblings in the present, $t(107) = 4.62$, $p < .001$, they actually rated their past conflict skills and behavior as worse than their siblings', $t(107) = 2.34$, $p < .021$.

Because of a marginally significant three-way interaction (Time × Target × Sibling), $F(1, 107) = 3.73$, $p < .056$, we also examined the results separately for older and younger siblings. Means are presented in Table 3. The overall pattern of the means was essentially the same for older and younger siblings. Both evaluated themselves more favorably than their sibling in the present (ts[107] > 2.29, ps < .024); however, only older siblings rated themselves as significantly worse than their siblings in the past, $t(107) = 2.15$, $p < .034$. Younger siblings rated themselves as roughly equal to their older sibling in the past, $t(107) < 1.0$. Consequently, older siblings reported a greater degree of personal improvement over time than did their younger siblings (mean difference between past and present scores = 2.12 and 1.82, respectively), $t(107) = 2.00$, $p < .048$. Older and younger siblings did not differ in the degree of change they reported for their siblings (M difference between past and present scores = 1.65 and 1.59, respectively), $t(107) < 1.0$.

Discussion

The results of Studies 4 and 5 suggest that culturally held theories of development alone cannot account for people's tendency to be less favorable toward their prior than their current selves. General theories should be reflected in participants' evaluations of self and of others to the same degree. Studies 4 and 5 provide converging evidence that people judge themselves to be on a steeper trajectory of improvement than they ascribe to acquaintances or even to close family members. In Study 4, participants reported that they improved over only a few months while their acquaintances remained stable. In Study 5, pairs of siblings indicated that both their own and their sibling's conflict behavior and resolution skills improved with age, but that their own rate of improvement was greater. Siblings are interesting from the current perspective because they have a long history, are relatively close, and know each other well. By including both members of sibling dyads, we obtain evidence that reports of greater personal improvement do not reflect the reality of those sibling relationships. Logically, they could not both have improved more than their sibling did.

Although we did not predict differences in older and younger siblings' evaluations, we found that older siblings reported even more personal improvement than did younger siblings. In the past, they were worse than their sibling was, but now they are better. Conceivably, this finding indicates that older siblings were in fact more responsible than their siblings for the earlier conflicts. However, older children's greater derogation of their past selves is also consistent with temporal self-appraisal theory: Being older also means they are more distant from their childhood self. On average, the past self that older siblings described was 2.7 years more remote than it was for younger siblings. The greater temporal distance may account for older siblings' less favorable evaluations of their former selves.

Table 3
Older and Younger Siblings' Ratings of Conflict Avoidance and Resolution Skills for Self and Other in the Past and Present (Study 5)

	Older sibling		Younger sibling	
Time period	Self	Other	Self	Other
Past	3.46	3.65	3.59	3.67
Present	5.58	5.30	5.41	5.25

Note. Higher numbers indicate more favorable ratings.

Study 6

In the final study, we examined the effects of temporal distance and importance on appraisals of former selves. We manipulated apparent temporal distance while holding actual distance constant. The theory of temporal self-appraisal suggests that evaluations should become increasingly unfavorable as past selves "feel" further away, even if actual temporal distance remains the same. We attempted to alter participants' psychological experience of temporal distance by describing the same past point in time as either very recent or fairly distant. By manipulating apparent temporal distance while keeping actual distance constant, we separated the passage of time per se from its psychological significance. We expected greater derogation of earlier selves when the past was depicted as distant rather than recent. We also predicted that derogation of distant past selves would be more evident on characteristics that participants judged to be important rather than unimportant. According to the theory of temporal self-appraisal, individuals should evaluate themselves favorably on important traits in the recent past (which reflect directly on current self) and negatively on important attributes in the distant past (which can act as a contrast and highlight improvement). Participants should be

[7] Cronbach's alpha is reported in this study because all items are intended to measure a single dimension—sibling conflict behavior. Internal consistency is not reported in other studies because the dependent measures represent a cross-section of personal attributes that should reflect overall favorability toward the self or others, rather than a single dimension. Cronbach's alpha would therefore be uninformative (mean alphas ranged from .31 to .74, averaging .64). Aggregating these items is appropriate for analyses of means. Only in Study 4 could internal consistency lead to an interpretation issue: If alphas were systematically lower for other than for self, it could contribute to the nonsignificant effect of time reported for acquaintances. Cronbach's alphas were as high for ratings of acquaintance (mean alpha = .74) as they were for self (mean alpha = .73).

less concerned about praising recent selves and criticizing distant selves on traits that they deem to be unimportant. Presumably, people will be more motivated to perceive improvement on personally important attributes because these will have a greater impact on self-regard. Note that by manipulating apparent rather than real temporal distance, we ensure that preexisting differences in the trajectories of important and unimportant attributes cannot account for the predicted results, because actual time remains constant.

Method

Participants. Fifty-six students (31 women and 13 men, 12 did not indicate gender[8]) enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated for partial fulfillment of their course credit.

Procedure. Participants answered the self-rating questionnaire as part of a larger compilation of questionnaires distributed to the class. Participants completed the booklet on their own time and returned it within the next 2 weeks to receive credit. All participants first rated their current selves (within the past 2 weeks) on 7 desirable (socially skilled, self-confident, independent/self-reliant, adapt well to new situations, serious about school, self-motivated, and satisfied with life) and 3 undesirable attributes (narrow minded, immature, and naive). They rated themselves relative to their same-aged peers on the 11-point scales used in the earlier studies. They were next asked to read through the list of 10 attributes and indicate which trait was *most important* to them, personally, and which trait was *least important* to them. Therefore, all participants rated importance after completing their current evaluations and before indicating their retrospective evaluations. This order of obtaining the measures ensures that importance was salient when participants made their retrospective assessments.

Finally, participants were asked to think of the beginning of that school term, which was approximately 2 months prior. In the recent condition, participants read the following: "Now, take a moment to think of a point in time in the recent past, the beginning of this term. What were you like then?" In the distant condition, the instructions read "Now, take a moment to think back to another point in time. Think all the way back to the beginning of this term. What were you like way back then?" Participants were instructed to evaluate themselves within the first 2 weeks of the term, relative to their same-aged peers at the time. They rated themselves on the same list of traits as they used to assess their present selves.

After completing their self-ratings, participants were asked to indicate how psychologically distant the beginning of the term felt to them. The question read: "Sometimes, points in time *in the past* feel very far away, while other times they feel very close, almost like yesterday. How far away does the beginning of this term FEEL to you?" Participants circled a number on an 11-point scale: responses ranged from 0 (*almost like yesterday*) to 10 (*very distant past*).

Results

Self-evaluations. Initial analyses were conducted on participants' ratings of all 10 attributes. Analyses including valence (desirable vs. undesirable attributes) as a variable (with all items scored in the positive direction) revealed no significant effects for valence. Therefore, responses to all items were aggregated and submitted to a Time (present vs. past self) × Temporal Distance (recent vs. distant) mixed ANOVA. Analyses revealed a main effect of time, $F(1, 54) = 5.19$, $p < .027$, qualified by a Time × Temporal Distance interaction, $F(1, 54) = 6.11$, $p < .017$. When the beginning of the term was represented as recent, people's evaluations reflected little change from the beginning of the term to the present time, $F(1, 33) < 1$, (Ms = 6.10 and 6.08, respectively). When the identical point in time was portrayed as distant, people's assessments indicated significant improvement from past to present, $F(1, 21) = 11.09$, $p < .003$, (Ms = 5.58 and 6.15, respectively). Ratings of present selves did not differ in the two temporal distance conditions, but people evaluated their past selves significantly less favorably in the distant than in the recent condition, $F(1, 54) = 9.37$, $p < .01$.

Next we examined participants' evaluations of their most and least important attributes. Participants indicated the attribute that was most and least important to them. Their past and present self-ratings on their specified attributes were obtained and submitted to a Time (present vs. past self) × Importance (most vs. least important) × Temporal Distance (recent vs. distant) mixed ANOVA (see Table 4 for means). Main effects of time, $F(1, 54) = 9.77$, $p < .003$, and importance, $F(1, 54) = 9.78$, $p < .003$, indicated that, overall, participants rated their present selves more favorably than their past selves (Ms = 6.91 and 6.37) and evaluated themselves more favorably on important attributes than on unimportant traits (Ms = 7.07 and 6.20). A Time × Temporal Distance interaction, $F(1, 54) = 5.17$, $p < .027$, replicated the interaction pattern from the overall analyses. However, this interaction was qualified by a significant Time × Importance × Temporal Distance interaction, $F(1, 54) = 6.80$, $p < .012$.

We conducted a Time × Temporal Distance ANOVA on the most important and on the least important attributes separately. The most important traits revealed a main effect of time, $F(1, 54) = 7.16$, $p < .01$, qualified by the predicted Time × Temporal Distance interaction, $F(1, 54) = 9.12$, $p < .004$. Participants evaluated their past attributes less favorably than their current attributes when traits were personally important and when the beginning of the term was portrayed as distant from the present, $t(21) = 3.92$, $p < .001$. However, past and present ratings did not differ when the past was described as recent, $t(33) < 1$. Participants in the recent and distant conditions rated their current standing on their most valued attribute equally highly, $t(54) < 1$, but those in the distant condition evaluated their past standing less favorably than did those in the recent condition, $t(54) = 2.43$, $p < .02$.

Participants' evaluations of their least important attributes were unaffected by the distance manipulation. The Time × Temporal Distance ANOVA revealed a main effect of time, indicating that individuals rated themselves more favorably in the present than in the past, $F(1, 54) = 4.29$, $p < .043$, but no interaction, $F(1, 54) < 1$. The main effect indicated that participants evaluated past selves less favorably than present selves on unimportant traits, regardless of apparent temporal distance.

We predicted that the individuals' ratings of present and distant former selves would evidence more improvement when traits were important rather than unimportant. To examine this prediction directly, we conducted a Time × Importance ANOVA within the distant condition. A significant Time × Importance interaction, $F(1, 21) = 9.54$, $p < .006$, revealed that participants evaluated their distant past selves significantly less favorably than their present selves on important attributes, $t(21) = 3.92$, $p < .001$ (as

[8] Questionnaires were anonymous so that gender could not be determined for those who neglected to indicate it in the space provided.

Table 4
Ratings of Most and Least Important Attribute in the Present and the Recent or Distant Past (Study 6)

Perceived distance and time period	Most important	Least important
Recent		
Past	7.32	5.91
Present	7.23	6.29
Distant		
Past	6.14	6.09
Present	7.59	6.50

Note. Higher numbers indicate more favorable ratings.

noted previously), but not on unimportant attributes, $t(21) = 1.68$, $p < .11$. Although participants perceive some improvement overall on unimportant traits, they are particularly critical of distant selves and favorable toward recent selves on attributes they consider to be important.

Finally, participants evaluated themselves as better than most of their peers in all of the experimental conditions ($ts[54] > 2.06$, $ps < .05$). Even on their least important traits, participants apparently judge themselves to be relatively superior.

Temporal distance manipulation check. The single item assessing participants' feelings of psychological distance did not successfully distinguish between the apparent recent and distant conditions, $t(54) < 1$, $Ms = 3.56$ and 3.50.

Discussion

As predicted by the theory of temporal self-appraisal, the tendency to disparage distant relative to current selves was especially evident when participants deemed the trait to be important. Note that the manipulation of apparent distance followed the assessment of importance; therefore, the same types of characteristics were either criticized or not, depending on the portrayal of the beginning of the term as recent or distant. In addition, participants appraised themselves more favorably overall on important attributes. This finding is consistent with evidence from previous research that individuals rate their desirable qualities as more important than their undesirable qualities (Baumeister, 1998; Pelham, 1991).

The results from Study 6 indicate that apparent temporal distance need not correspond to real time. Participants appraised their past selves less favorably on important traits when the same point in time was described as "way back then" rather than as "recent." Although the temporal distance manipulation check failed to reveal an effect of the manipulation, the results from the major analyses are consistent with the predictions. The manipulation check was obtained at the end of the questionnaire and the effects of the manipulation may have dissipated. Alternatively, perhaps in responding to the manipulation check participants could not overlook actual temporal distance, which was the same in both conditions.

General Discussion

An individual's sense of identity includes, among other things, a perception of self through time (Albert, 1977; James, 1890/1950). The present research examined a core aspect of this perception: people's evaluations of their current and former selves. The initial studies demonstrated that people evaluate distant past selves less favorably than present selves. Subsequent studies revealed that this discrepancy between assessments of the present and the past is more marked for evaluations of self than for evaluations of others. The final study showed people's tendency to denigrate their own past selves is moderated by temporal distance and attribute importance. As predicted by temporal self-appraisal theory, individuals are more likely to derogate psychologically distant past selves on attributes that they judge to be important. The finding that attribute importance predicts assessments of former selves adds support to the argument that people are *motivated* to derogate former selves. Greater derogation occurs when people care about the attributes being judged.

It is necessary to use the term *derogation* judiciously, however. Participants evaluated their distant former selves less favorably than their present selves, but generally appraised even their distant selves as superior to same-aged peers. Only in Study 5 did we find evidence that individuals systematically rated their past selves as equal or inferior to a relevant social comparison standard, in this instance their sibling. This finding in Study 5 may be due, in part, to the use of a specific other (sibling) as a standard of comparison rather than the more general standard "same-aged peers" (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995).

Although we can infer with some confidence that people view their current selves as better than their distant past selves on important attributes, we are less certain about what to conclude from comparisons to same-aged peers. Yes, people see themselves as superior to their peers at every age, but then they tend to view just about any specific individual as superior to his or her peers (Study 4; Klar & Giladi, 1997). An important finding in the current studies is that people view their superiority to their peers as greater now than in the past. Moreover this perception of increasing superiority seems to be limited to self (Study 4). Individuals perceive themselves to be champs now and, by comparison to their current status, chumps in the past.

At the beginning of this article, we presented a number of alternative interpretations for the finding that people evaluate past selves less favorably than present selves. The most obvious alternative is that people's evaluations reflect actual improvement with age. Our research findings suggest, however, that this does not provide a complete explanation of derogation of past selves. In Study 3, participants retrospectively derogated their past selves over a short time period in which concurrent evaluations showed no evidence of genuine improvement in self-views. In Study 6, individuals evaluated their past selves less favorably when the identical point in time was described as fairly distant rather than recent. Thus, retrospective evaluations change in response to psychological as well as actual temporal distance. Such effects cannot reflect genuine differences in the tendency to improve with age. We do not dispute the idea that people may improve with age on many attributes and that such increases influence people's evaluations of themselves through time. We argue, however, that other factors contribute significantly to the phenomenon of retrospective derogation.

We discussed implicit theories of development as a second possible contributor to people's perceptions of themselves through time. Regardless of their validity, implicit theories could affect people's retrospective evaluations of their past selves. Implicit

theories are usually described as culturally shared beliefs about development. There is little doubt that such beliefs can affect people's constructions of their past attributes (Ross, 1989). Again though, we suggest that this is not the entire story. Culturally shared beliefs about development could not explain why people judge themselves to be improving at a greater rate than their peers and siblings (Studies 4 and 5).

The theory of temporal appraisal emphasizes the significance of two variables, attribute importance and apparent temporal distance, that are not core to the notion of implicit theories. Post hoc, one might incorporate both of these concepts into an implicit theories explanation of the data. It is reasonable to suppose that people will associate more improvement with greater apparent distance. One might also posit that people expect more rapid developmental change on attributes they deem to be important; however, we are aware of no direct evidence in support this hypothesis. Although an implicit theories explanation may arguably predict two main effects of these variables, it would seem less likely to predict the obtained interaction between attribute importance and temporal distance. This interaction is a central prediction of temporal self-appraisal theory.

Finally, the hindsight hypothesis (Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975) also provides a compelling account of some instances of retrospective derogation. People do sometimes disparage their past selves on the basis of subsequent information. If, as hindsight predicts, an individual feels she knew an outcome "all along," past behaviors can seem foolish indeed. A hindsight bias, however, does not readily explain the effects of attribute importance and apparent temporal distance.

Although the current studies do not provide conclusive evidence that people revise the past because they are motivated to see current selves in a favorable light, this interpretation accounts for the pattern of results more plausibly than do alternative explanations. A motivational interpretation is also consistent with the findings of recent research that suggests that people sometimes use temporal appraisals to enhance their current self-worth (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Taylor et al., 1995; Wilson & Ross, 2000). It is reasonable to ask, though, why people would choose to maintain their favorable self-views by denigrating former selves, rather than using a host of other self-enhancement mechanisms that have been detailed in past research (Baumeister, 1998). Clearly, revising the past is only one of many tactics people can use to feel good about themselves. Nonetheless because of its ephemeral nature, people may find the past to be a particularly useful resource in their quest to maintain favorable self-views. People are less able to idealize the present when they are confronted with evidence to the contrary (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; McFarland & Alvaro, 2000). However, they can almost always selectively recall and reconstruct evidence from the past that makes them feel good about their current selves.

In addition, revising the past downward may be more functional than revising the current self upward. Although positive illusions about the self can benefit both psychological and physical well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988), excessive enhancement of current self may have negative consequences (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995). Through criticizing distant past selves, people may be able to feel good about themselves without unrealistically inflating their current self-views. In Study 3 of the current research, for example, participants derogated their past selves while providing moderate assessments of their current selves. By derogating former selves, participants could see themselves as improving even though their contemporaneous impressions of themselves actually worsened slightly. If people continually boosted their current selves rather than criticizing their earlier selves, their present self-views might become highly inconsistent with objective indicators and difficult to maintain.

We have shown that both young and middle-aged adults evaluate their distant earlier selves less favorably than their current selves. Would older adults be unlikely to show this effect? Previous research suggests that older participants are more likely than their younger counterparts to report no improvement from their past selves, and to sometimes report decline (Fleeson & Heckhausen, 1997; Ryff, 1991). Does this result indicate that the theory of temporal self-appraisal does not apply to senior citizens? Before accepting this conclusion, we would want to investigate the impact of attribute importance and temporal distance on older adults' retrospective evaluations. The theory of temporal self-appraisal predicts that individuals should derogate distant selves primarily on traits that they judge to be important. It may be that attributes considered important by older adults in these studies are different from those valued by younger participants. Temporal-self appraisal theory suggests that people can alter their assessments of attribute importance and distance, as well as their evaluations of former selves (Ross & Wilson, 2000). Importance may shift with age, as people perceive improvements or decrements on certain attributes. For example, as a woman ages, she may place less importance on physical attractiveness and more value on wisdom or compassion. Thus, she can ensure that the dimensions on which she continues to perceive improvement have the greatest impact on her overall self-worth. She may also be more inclined to derogate her past wisdom (an important trait) than her former appearance (now a less important attribute).

Differences in perceived temporal distance could also help explain Ryff's (1991) findings. In Ryff's study, the age of the past selves differed according to current ages. The young adults recalled themselves as adolescents, the middle-aged persons remembered their young adulthood (20–25 years of age), and the older adults recalled their middle adulthood (40–50 years of age). Because the different cohorts were asked to think back a varying number of years, it is unlikely that they perceived the temporal distance of the past selves to be equivalent. There is also evidence that older adults tend to judge the same passage of time as briefer than do younger adults (Block, Zakay, & Hancock, 1998; Wallach & Green, 1961). This discrepancy could potentially explain why older adults sometimes enhance remote past selves: They are seen as psychologically recent.

Finally, the current studies emphasize people's assessments of their standing relative to their peers. This distinguishes the present approach from much of the past research with older adults, where participants rated themselves on an absolute scale rather than on a relative one. It may well be that older individuals would rate themselves as stable or declining in an *absolute* sense, whereas they might view themselves as improving in their *relative standing*. For example, a 65-year-old may well recognize that she has declined in physical fitness since her mid-20s. At the same time, she may judge herself now to be much better relative to her peers than she was in her 20s.

In the current article, we demonstrated people's tendency to derogate distant past selves. We suggest that people will criticize these earlier selves because they can provide flattering downward temporal comparisons (Albert, 1977). However, just as downward social comparisons are not always enhancing (e.g., Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990), there are circumstances when criticizing even distant former selves has negative implications for current selves. Individuals should be reluctant to derogate a remote self if they see its possible defects as tainting the present self. If, for example, people's past behavior could be construed as immoral, then even exemplary conduct in the more recent past may not serve to counteract fully the evaluative implications of their earlier actions. While running for the Republican Presidential nomination, George W. Bush made headlines for refusing to disclose whether he used cocaine more than 25 years ago. It may be that Bush and his advisors believe that cocaine use will be regarded as indicating a lasting character flaw, rather than a youthful indiscretion (Bush readily admitted to excessive drinking at an earlier age). More generally, people possess implicit theories concerning the mutability of traits (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). They view some personal characteristics as readily changeable and others as stable. People should be particularly interested in critiquing their past behavior on dimensions perceived as malleable, whereas they will avoid highlighting past shortcomings on unchangeable traits.

There may also be individual differences in the tendency to denigrate former selves. For example, some people tend to believe that personal attributes are fixed, whereas others believe they can be altered over time (e.g., Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997). People who believe that attributes are fixed should be unlikely to criticize their former selves on these traits. If they denigrated earlier selves, they would essentially be criticizing their current selves. Finally, temporal self-appraisal processes may vary culturally. For example, in cultures in which the motivation to maintain positive self-regard is reduced or absent (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), people may be less inclined to criticize distant past selves relative to current selves.

In closing, we note that derogation of the past may yield an additional psychological benefit for individuals in western cultures. People often find it difficult to remain happy, even when receiving a steady diet of positive outcomes. Theorists tend to attribute such declines in happiness to habituation (Brickman et al., 1978; Frijda, 1988). Brickman and Campbell (1971) noted that, because happiness is relative, the experience of the occasional negative outcome might forestall habituation. Indeed, Brickman and Campbell suggested that "perhaps the happiest adult is one who had a moderately unhappy childhood" (p. 293). Alternatively, we propose that it may be unnecessary to actually experience negative outcomes. The same result should obtain if people retrospectively exaggerate the unhappiness of their pasts. A tendency to disparage the past may counteract the effects of habituation, allowing people to appreciate both their present selves and their life circumstances.

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