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**BRIEF REPORT**

# Romantic involvement, self-discrepancy, and psychological well-being: A preliminary investigation

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<sup>a</sup>*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and* <sup>b</sup>*University of Texas at Austin* **Abstract**

In this study, we explored the relation between romantic involvement status, actual/ideal self-discrepancy, and psychological well-being. We hypothesized that romantically involved individuals would report being closer to their ideal selves than would romantically uninvolved individuals. We also hypothesized that the reduced self-discrepancy reported by romantically involved individuals would be related to their experiencing higher levels of psychological well-being in comparison to romantically uninvolved individuals. Romantically involved and romantically uninvolved subjects rated their actual selves, closeness to their ideal selves, and psychological well-being. Results were consistent with both hypotheses. Although romantically involved and romantically uninvolved subjects did not differ in ratings of their actual selves, romantically involved subjects reported being significantly closer to their ideal selves. Furthermore, romantically involved subjects tended to report higher psychological well-being.

Although a great deal of research has examined the precursors, correlates, and consequences of romantic involvement (Brehm, 1992), very little research has focused on the relation between romantic involvement and the self-concept, hereafter referred to as the self (i.e., the individual's perception of his or her attributes). The objective of the present study is to explore whether romantic involvement is associated with changes in the self. More specifically, the present study attempts to provide preliminary answers to two questions: (1) Is romantic involvement

associated with the magnitude of actual/ideal self-discrepancy? (2) Is the magnitude of actual/ideal self-discrepancy linked to overall psychological well-being?

The actual/ideal self-discrepancy (hereafter referred to as "self-discrepancy") has been defined as the measurable difference between an individual's beliefs about who he actually thinks he is (actual self) and his image of the person he would ideally like to be (ideal self) (Higgins, 1987). For example, an individual who earns \$30,000 a year and ideally sees herself as making \$100,000 a year has a rather large self-discrepancy. Conversely, an individual who makes \$30,000 a year and ideally sees herself as making \$30,000 a year has no self-discrepancy. Furthermore, self-discrepancy, because it consists of the difference between the actual self and the ideal self, can be

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changed by altering at least one of the two selves: that is, a decrease in self-discrepancy can result from an increase in the actual self or a decrease in the ideal self. Although self-discrepancy has been a prolific topic in psychological research (for reviews, see Higgins, 1987, 1989), the relation between romantic involvement and self-discrepancy has not yet been empirically explored.

In the present study we set forth two hypotheses. First, romantically involved individuals will report smaller self-discrepancies than will romantically uninvolved individuals. Second, the lower self-discrepancy experienced by romantically involved individuals will be associated with greater psychological well-being. These hypotheses reflect the exploratory nature of this investigation in that, instead of being derived from one predominant theoretical position, they reflect insights gleaned from a range of theories, as well as speculation.

Consistent with our first hypothesis are six formulations, which can be divided into two general classes: one class that predicts a decrease in self-discrepancy via an increase in ratings of the actual self (formulations 1 and 2) and another class that predicts a decrease in self-discrepancy via a decrease in

the ideal self (formulations 3-6).<sup>1</sup> A description of the six formulations follows.

1. Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) focuses on the expansion of the self that accompanies involvement in close relationships. Although self-expansion theory does not make any concrete predictions regarding self-discrepancy, it is possible that the self, as

it expands, becomes closer to the ideal self with a consequent reduction in self-discrepancy.

2. One suggested extension of interdependence theory, *promotive interdependence*, is defined as the process by which one relationship partner facilitates, through expectancy processes and behavioral interaction, the other partner becoming his or her ideal self (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). This analysis suggests that romantically involved individuals who are engaged in promotive relationships will experience a reduction in self-discrepancy over the course of the relationship as their actual self-concept becomes closer to their ideal self. This process, although theoretically relevant, is not directly examined in the current study because there is no measure of the degree to which the romantically involved individuals studied are engaged in promotively interdependent relationships.
3. The psychodynamic formulation set forth by Freud (1922/1959) and Reik (1944) states that, when an individual falls in love, his or her ego-ideal is projected onto the partner, and thus the discrepancy between the ego and ego-ideal is reduced via a perceived reduction in the ego-ideal. This formulation, however, is concerned (a) with love rather than romantic involvement, and (b) with the ego-ideal, a construct that does not directly correspond to the ideal self.
4. Romantic involvement can be seen as a process of relinquishing individual level ideals, goals, and desires to obtain and maintain a state of relatedness, security, and intimacy with another individual (Campbell, Elliott, Reeder, & Sedikides, 1994; Guisinger & Blatt, 1994; Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994; Sedikides & Strube, 1994; see also Sedikides, 1993). Romantically involved individuals, then, should be expected to place less importance on

1. It is possible that self-discrepancy in romantic relationships may be reduced by other, more complex processes involving a simultaneous change in the actual and ideal self. If, for example, the actual self is decreased only moderately and the ideal self is decreased to a larger extent, the result would be an overall decrease in self-discrepancy. Simultaneous change in the actual and ideal self is especially likely if the two selves are nonindependent. That is, a change in one self would sometimes bring about a change in the other self.

individual centered ideals, which may result in a compromise (i.e., diminishing) of the ideal self and therefore a reduction in reported self-discrepancy.

5. Romantically involved individuals may believe that their partners are involved with them because of who they are and not because of who they may become. Thus, these individuals may not feel as strongly the need to attain the ideals they once held. This process would lead to a reduction in the ideal self and a corresponding reduction in self-discrepancy.
6. Romantically involved individuals may become disillusioned after getting to know their partners and thus reduce to more realistic levels their goals and ideals in all other aspects of their lives. Thus, self-discrepancy would be reduced as a result of a reduction in the ideal self.

Consistent with our second hypothesis—namely, that a decrease in self-discrepancy leads to increased psychological well-being—is the work of Higgins and colleagues (Higgins, 1987, 1989; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Higgins, Vookles, & Tykocinski, 1992). These researchers have shown that self-discrepancy is linked to emotional vulnerability; that is, the greater the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves, the greater the individual's risk of experiencing dejection-related emotions such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Emotional vulnerability and psychological well-being are not isomorphic constructs, the former referring to the likelihood of experiencing certain negative emotional states (Higgins, 1987) and the latter referring to a more global, positive or negative experience of life (Ryff, 1989). Arguably, however, those individuals who experience feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration repeatedly in their lives will also report lower psychological well-being in comparison to individuals who do not experience these negative emotional states.

## Methods

Subjects were 128 (60 men and 68 women, *Age* = 19.8) romantically involved (i.e., dating) and 54 (30 men and 24 women, *Age* = 19.6) romantically uninvolved, predominantly (97%) white, heterosexual, second- and third-year undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The roughly 2% of subjects who reported being homosexual were not included in the study because they constituted a small sample size. Romantically involved subjects had been involved with their present partner an average of 8 months and reported an average relationship satisfaction score of 28.5 out of 35 on the Relationship Assessment Scale<sup>2</sup> (Hendrick, 1988). Subjects were not preselected on the basis of romantic involvement status; this was assessed at the end of the study.

Subjects completed two questionnaires. The first of these was Pelham and Swann's (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire, which asks subjects to rate both actual self and closeness to ideal self on the following 10 attributes: intellectual ability, social competence, artistic ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability, common sense, emotional stability, sense of humor, and discipline. Subjects indicated, on a 10-point scale ranging from "bottom 5%" to "top 5%," what percentile they would fall into along each of these 10 attributes compared to their peers (actual self-rating). Subjects further indicated, on a 10-point scale ranging from "very short of my ideal self" to "very much like my ideal self," the degree to which they differed from their ideal self along each of the 10 attributes (self-discrepancy rating). Both the reliability and the validity of this questionnaire have been demonstrated in college-age samples (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

2. We conducted ancillary analyses to determine if scores on the Relationship Assessment Scale predicted reported self-discrepancy in romantically involved subjects. No statistically significant predictive relation was found.

The second questionnaire was the Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989) in which subjects rated their level of well-being along 6 domains: positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Subjects responded to a total of 84 statements on a scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire have been demonstrated in college-age and older samples (Ryff, 1989).

## Results

We used multiple regression analyses to test both hypotheses. We effects-coded all dichotomous variables (i.e., 1, -1) and centered all predictor variables (i.e., for each variable we subtracted the mean from each value, thus creating a new variable with a mean of zero) (Aiken & West, 1991). We tested the first hypothesis (i.e., romantically involved individuals have smaller self-discrepancies than do romantically uninvolved individuals) by using two dichotomous variables, romantic involvement status (romantically involved, romantically uninvolved) and sex (female, male), as well as the interaction term, as predictors. Self-discrepancy served as the criterion variable. The predicted main effect of romantic involvement status on self-discrepancy was obtained: romantically involved subjects ( $M = 73.82$ ) rated themselves as being significantly closer to their ideal selves than romantically uninvolved subjects ( $M = 67.43$ ),  $b = 3.20$ ,  $p = .009$ . Neither the sex main effect nor the interaction was significant.

We wondered whether the smaller self-discrepancy reported by romantically involved individuals was simply the result of romantically involved subjects feeling closer to their ideal selves on the attributes of "social competence" and/or "physical attractiveness," given that these two attributes are associated with success in interpersonal relationships (Reis, Wheeler, Spiegel, Kernis, Nezlek, & Perry, 1982). This possibility was not supported. When we replaced

overall self-discrepancy with each of the 10 attributes as criterion variables in the above model, we found that romantic involvement status significantly (or marginally significantly) predicted not only physical attractiveness,  $b = .44$ ,  $p = .026$ , but also leadership ability,  $b = .38$ ,  $p = .051$ , discipline,  $b = .32$ ,  $p = .092$ , and athletic ability  $b = .58$ ,  $p = .008$ . Neither social competence nor any of the remaining 5 attributes were significantly predicted in this equation.

A reduction in self-discrepancy can be the result of at least two processes: an increase in the actual self or a decrease in the ideal self. To gain some insight as to which of these two processes was at work, we examined the difference in actual self-ratings reported by romantically involved and romantically uninvolved subjects. The logic behind this analysis was as follows. If there is a difference in the reported self-discrepancy of romantically involved and romantically uninvolved subjects, but no difference in these two groups' actual self-ratings, then the difference in self-discrepancy can be attributed to a difference in the ideal self. We conducted a multiple regression analysis with romantic involvement status, sex, and the interaction term as predictor variables and actual self-ratings as the criterion variable. We found no difference in the actual selves of romantically involved ( $M = 69.98$ ) and romantically uninvolved ( $M = 67.85$ ) subjects,  $b = 1.08$ ,  $p = .156$ . We therefore tentatively concluded that it was the ideal selves of romantically involved and romantically uninvolved subjects that differed. Compared to romantically uninvolved persons, romantically involved persons appeared to have lower ideal selves.

To test our second hypothesis (i.e., reduced self-discrepancy in romantically involved subjects is associated with higher psychological well-being), we first tested the link between romantic involvement status, sex, and the interaction term, on the one hand, and the six domains of psychological well-being as well as overall psychological well-being, on the other. If a signifi-

cant relation was found between romantic involvement status and psychological well-being, then self-discrepancy could be examined as a potential mediator of this relation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). We found that romantic involvement status was significantly related to *only* the "positive relatedness" domain of psychological well-being,  $b = 2.54$ ,  $p = .005$ , thus essentially ruling out self-discrepancy as a mediator of the relation between romantic involvement status and psychological well-being.

Next, we examined the relation between self-discrepancy, sex, and the interaction term (with romantic involvement status controlled for by being placed in the equation first) and overall psychological well-being, as well as the six domains of psychological well-being. We found that self-discrepancy had a marginally significant relation to overall psychological well-being,  $b = .40$ ,  $p = .081$ . Furthermore, self-discrepancy was significantly related to three domains of psychological well-being (environmental mastery,  $b = .14$ ,  $p = .001$ , purpose in life,  $b = .16$ ,  $p = .001$ , and self-acceptance,  $b = .17$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and marginally significantly related to another (personal growth,  $b = .07$ ,  $p = .069$ ). In all cases, the closer subjects felt to their ideal selves, the more likely they were to report higher psychological well-being.

## Discussion

The results were generally consistent with our hypotheses. Romantically involved individuals felt closer to their ideal selves than did romantically uninvolved individuals, with the two groups not differing in ratings of their actual selves. Furthermore, feeling closer to one's ideal self was associated with a higher reported level of psychological well-being in several domains, although self-discrepancy did not mediate the relation between romantic involvement and psychological well-being.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are at least four possible processes that may lead to romantically involved individuals'

experiencing lower self-discrepancy associated with a reduction in ideal self, but no change in actual self. These processes include: (a) the projection of the ego-ideal onto the romantic partner (Freud, 1922/1959; Reik, 1944), (b) a change in the focus of romantically involved persons from one of individual achievement and autonomy to one of "relatedness," (c) a belief on the part of romantically involved persons that they do not need to attain an ideal self because their actual self is accepted by their partner, and (d) the experience of disillusionment by romantically involved persons after getting to know their partners. Clearly, future research is needed to determine which process underlies the lower self-discrepancy reported by romantically involved vis-a-vis romantically uninvolved individuals.

Future research can also improve upon the present study in several ways. First, our data are correlational; therefore, directionality cannot be determined and causal inferences cannot be made. For instance, it is possible that people who engage in relationships have a lower ideal self to begin with. The use of longitudinal designs could lead to a better understanding of directionality, and the use of experimental designs, such as manipulating the accessibility in memory of existing romantic relationships (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1991) or manipulating relationship closeness with self-discrepancy treated as a dependent variable, would enable causal conclusions to be drawn. Second, lower self-discrepancy may be a phenomenon that occurs mainly in the context of young adults' romantic relationships. For example, the self-discrepancies of older individuals may be more resistant to change. The study of individuals in other age brackets would help to clarify this issue.

Overall, our results provide a preliminary demonstration of one of the many ways in which romantic involvement is likely to be related to the self. The results are provocative in that they open up new and exciting research vistas. It remains for future research to take on the challenge.

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