

Communication and Self-Expansion: Perceptions of Changes in the Self Due to a Close Relationship.

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Abstract

Building from Aron and Aron's (2000) Self-Expansion Model, this study was designed to explore the ways that communication in close relationships forms the self. Ninety-two participants (males = 23, females = 68, mean age = 22.2 years) completed a semi-structured, retrospective questionnaire on the ways that a close friendship or romantic relationship had changed who they were as a person. Data were inductively analyzed to describe both the content of the self that changed and the relational processes that led to change. The content of perceived changes in the self was perceived primarily in new ways of relating (52.3%) and changes in self-understanding (29.7%). This self-expansion was generally positive (65% of changes), while 20.1% of growth in the self was simultaneously positive and negative. Three relational processes were perceived to shape the self: 1) communicative events; 2) the discovery of partner differences and similarities; and 3) diffuse qualities of an ongoing relationship. The findings highlight the role of communication in self-expansion.

Keywords: self-expansion; communication; close relationships.

Personal relationships research commonly connects selves and relationships through studying the ways that the self affects a relationship (e.g., how attachment style affects marriage). Generally speaking, this scholarship views a close relationship as one in which parties have revealed maximum breadth and depth of their pre-formed selves (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Laurenceau, Barrett & Rovine, 2005). Although researchers have recognized that individuals develop and may change, this literature tends to treat the self as relatively stable (Baxter, 2004b). While the field seems to appreciate the ways that the self affects personal relationships, it is also important for researchers to examine the ways in which people are changed by relationships.

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Contemporary research points to the importance of close relationships for shaping the self (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Mashek, Aron & Boncimino, 2003). Aron et al. (2004) explained, “close relationships constantly and deeply shape, create, and recreate the self” (p. 102). This process may be one of the most important implications of close ties between individuals. Although changing the self seems to be a central feature of close relationships, there is little basic research about the role of communication in this process (Baxter, 2004b; Sampson, 1993). Recognizing this problem, interpersonal communication textbooks have called for more research to understand the link between communication and the self (e.g., Stewart, Zediker & Witteborn, 2005). The current study explores the ways in which friends and romantic partners perceive that they were shaped by close relationships, describing the aspects of the self that changed and perceptions of processes that produced these changes.

Writing over half a century ago, the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1990) conceived of the self as a product of dialogue. Although Bakhtin, Buber (1970), Mead (1934), and others first described the ways that communication shapes the self many years ago, Schlenker, Wowra, Johnson, and Miller (2008) noted that personal relationship researchers’ interest in these processes is relatively recent. Summarizing a dialogic understanding of the self, Holquist (1990, p. 18) wrote “the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness.” In Bakhtin’s words, “I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another’s help” (Bakhtin, as quoted in Todorov, 1984, p. 96). Bakhtin’s view reflects a constitutive understanding of communication. As Baxter (2004b) explained, “from a constitutive perspective... persons and relationships are not analytically separable from communication; instead, communication constitutes these phenomena” (p. 3). Scholarly interest in the constitutive approach to communication is growing (e.g., Cissna & Anderson, 2008; Cronen, 1995; Sigman, 1995). A constitutive approach directs our attention toward interaction and explains that relational partners’ contrasting perceptions are part of the process of creating selves (Baxter, 2003). A valuable contribution of the current investigation is its preliminary exploration of these relational

processes. For conceptual clarity, the design of the current study was guided by a well-tested theory: the Self-Expansion Model (SEM; Aron & Aron, 2000).

The Self-Expansion Model

Aron and Aron's (2000) SEM states that persons are attracted to others who can expand who they are—with respect to an increased sphere of influence and possession, increased knowledge, an expanded identity, and an increased awareness of their place in the universe. As Aron and Aron expressed it, “Metaphorically, I will have the use of all my house plus gain the use of all of yours” (p. 111). In their review of 15 years of research, Aron et al. (2004) concluded that the SEM has received strong empirical support, documenting predicted effects of close relationships. Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson (1991) found that outcomes (e.g., receiving money) for close others are treated like outcomes for the self. Actor-observer differences were smaller for close others than non-close others (Aron & Fraley, 1999), and a variety of experiments have suggested that information about self and close others are linked (e.g., Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003). Thus, I have expanded my self when I forget whether I or my partner discovered our favourite restaurant. In short, the research supports the model's claim that cognitive structures for self and close others are linked (Aron & Aron, 2006).

Although self-expansion is generally positive (Aron et al., 2004), relating may also change the self in negative ways. The model describes the negative or “stressful state of over-expansion” (Aron, et al., p. 116), which may be experienced in relationships that are too close or grow too quickly. To summarize using the building metaphor, the SEM describes how close others help us build additions to our homes (selves). Adding to our homes is a motivation for pursuing close ties, and although we are generally happy with results, building too much or too quickly is experienced negatively. As insightful as this research has been, it may not include all of the ways that selves are changed by close relationships. That is, what about remodeling?

Drigotas and his colleagues' (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999) study of the Michelangelo phenomenon documented the role of personal affirmation in reshaping the self. Drigotas explained his findings, noting that “just as Michelangelo released the ideal form hidden in the block of marble, so too do our romantic partners serve to ‘sculpt’ us in

some manner” (p. 72). This approach describes a feedback loop that affirms the self’s preformed ideal. Whereas research (e.g., Drigotas; Herbst, Gaertner & Insko, 2003) into the ideal self tends to highlight similarity between self and other (e.g., a shared view of one’s ideal self), Aron and Aron’s (2000) theory emphasizes the unique resources that a close other can bring to the self. However, it may be that neither research program fully describes the range of effects close relationships have on the structure of the self. Both research teams have examined predicted changes, rather than documenting the range of ways that selves are shaped by close relationships. The following questions about the scope of changes remain to be answered:

RQ₁: What kinds of changes in self do relationship parties attribute to their friendships and romantic relationships?

RQ₂: Are changes in self perceived to be positive and/or negative?

Change Processes

The relational processes that lead to change in the self likely include both cognition and communication. In a review of the SEM, Aron et al. (2004) theorized that the psychological

process may operate as follows: (a) people are motivated (generally not consciously) to include another in the self in order to include that other’s resources; (b) as the relationship is forming, each partner makes his or her resources readily available to the other; (c) this leads to the cognitive reorganisation that makes the other’s resources seem included in the self; (d) this leads to taking on to some extent the other’s perspective and identities; and (e) this leads to a reciprocal ongoing process strengthening the conscious and unconscious experience of including other’s resources in the self, which leads back to step (b). (p. 106)

While this description emphasizes the role of individual cognition in personal relationships, it includes interaction. The current study seeks to document the role of interpersonal processes, primarily in steps (b) and (e).

Although empirical work to explore the processes by which the self changes due to personal relationships has not developed to the same extent as the study of cognitive structures, the literature does provide guidance for exploring these processes. Aron, Paris, and Aron (1995) found that a person's self is expanded by falling in love; as predicted by the SEM, participants who reported falling in love showed an increased diversity of self-content domains in self-descriptions from before-to-after falling in love and when compared to a control group of people who did not report falling in love. Although falling in love suggests a joint, communicative process, the role of communication, joint activities, and other meaning making with the other are not well understood. Thus, we do not know what about falling in love that matters for the self. In many close relationships, falling in love is reciprocated and not simply an individual act; thus, we might ask about the role of communication in these changes. Does expressing love change the self? Do selves grow through hearing "I love you?" The SEM and research literature lead to such questions about interaction and change in the self.

The SEM predicts that differences between self and other play a role in self-expansion (Aron, Steele, Kashdan, & Perez, 2006). Baxter (2004b) argued that the self is "a relation between self and other, a simultaneity of sameness and difference" (p. 3). Baxter and West (2003) found that friends and romantic partners identified a range of ways in which they were similar and in which they differed. Communication about differences and similarities may affect self-expansion. With the aim of extending self-expansion research to include communication processes, a third research question guides the current study:

RQ₃: What are relationship parties' perceptions of how changes in self are brought about in their friendships and romantic relationships?

Method

Participants

Participants were 92 undergraduate students at a large public university in the central United States, although one participant failed to complete the instrument. Thus, 91 respondents are included. Participants included 68 (74.7%) women and 23 (25.3%) men. The vast majority of respondents (92%) were Caucasian, and the mean age of the participants was 22.2 years (range 19-26 years). Many experiments testing the SEM have studied college students. At this point in their lives, young people are developing a variety of personal relationships and may be particularly aware of the formation of the self.

Procedures

In compliance with the institution's human subjects policy, volunteers were recruited in a communication studies course and received extra credit for their participation. Responses were confidential.

Instrument. Participants completed a retrospective questionnaire relevant to the study's goals. Included were demographic questions about both the respondent and a close other. Volunteers were free to choose either a "close platonic friendship" or a "romantic relationship" for purposes of responding to the remaining questions; 69.2% of participants provided perceptions based on a romantic relationship, and the remainder reported on a close friendship. Following a page of demographic questions, researchers asked participants to list all of the different ways that they have changed as a result of the relationship they chose. Research of the self has commonly used self-reports (e.g., Derrick, Fabriel & Tippin, 2008; White, 2006). At the top of this second page, respondents were prompted with the following general instructions:

In what ways are you different because of this relationship? On this page, we would like you to list all of the ways, if any, in which you think this relationship has changed or altered who you are as a person. Sometimes these changes are positive;

sometimes these changes are negative; and sometimes these changes are both positive and negative. Changes can take many forms, for example, changes in attitudes/beliefs, changes in core values, changes in personality, changes in self-concept, and/or changes in behaviour. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers to this question. Please be as specific as possible in filling out the grid below. For each way you have changed, indicate whether you think the change was positive, negative, or both. In addition, indicate what happened in the relationship to bring about the change. Use the back for additional space, if needed.

The remainder of the page consisted of a grid with three columns, headed in all capitals “HOW HAVE YOU CHANGED?”, “WAS THIS CHANGE POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, OR BOTH?”, and “WHAT HAPPENED IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO BRING ABOUT THIS CHANGE IN YOU?” Because participants entered one perceived change per row, unitization was not needed.

Analysis

The unit of analysis was a perceived change in self, and there were a total of 279 changes. The coding system was developed using analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979). Analytic induction is an iterative process based on interpretive judgments of similarity and difference among units of data (e.g., a change-in-self). Responsive to the research questions, this analysis produced a three-category scheme to describe content (i.e., what changed) and another three themes to describe process (i.e., how the change occurred). Using a subset of the data, the author trained a graduate student to assist in coding. After training, perceived changes were randomly selected from the remaining records to assess reliability. Two raters (i.e., the author and the graduate assistant) independently coded 45 changes. Absolute agreement was 87% for content ($\kappa = .79$) and 82% for process ($\kappa = .72$).

Results

Participants reported a variety of ways in which they were different due to their relational partners. Participants generated a mean of 3.1 reported changes for their selected

relationship ($SD = 1.1$). Most of these changes were for opposite-sex romantic relationships (199; 71.4%), and platonic friendships numbered 80. No significant difference emerged in the number of changes-in-self reported for romantic relationships ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.19$) versus friendships ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .76$) $t(78.2) = -1.45$, ns. Data from these two types of close relationships are combined below. Female participants reported 76% of the changes. No significant difference emerged in the number of changes-in-self reported by women ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.1$) as opposed to men ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.04$) $t(89) = -.78$, ns. Before pursuing the central purpose of the current investigation—exploring interpersonal processes that change the self—first research question is addressed: what aspects of the self were transformed?

Content of Perceived Changes in Self

Types of perceived changes were grouped by the target or object of new understanding. As shown in Table 1, the three areas of change in the self involved a) relationships with others; b) self-understanding; and c) other. The example of attitude change illustrates the typology. Perceived changes in attitudes towards others are included with the first theme, attitudes towards the self are part of the second theme, and attitudes regarding career, religion and so forth are in the third.

Table 1.
Examples and Frequency of Perceived Changes in the Self

Change	Central Question	Examples	N
Relating	How can and should I communicate with others?	Becoming more assertive. Becoming more respectful.	146
Self-Understanding	Who am I?	Improving self-esteem. Feeling calmer.	83
Other	What is my place in the world?	Gaining knowledge of politics. Appreciating new music.	49
Total			278

Note: One uncodable response excluded.

Changes in Relating. Participants reported that involvement in the selected relationship changed how they relate to others. The dominant type of perceived change, conduct in relationships, characterized 52.3% of all reported changes. A total of 81.3% of participants reported at least one instance of this kind of change in the self. Many responses described how a particular relationship was altered. Typically referring to the relational partner who facilitated change, these data included “We are more independent of each other” and “I began adjusting my schedule around his.” Reflecting on conflict in her five-year romantic relationship, a 21-year-old woman, reported improved communication with her partner. She said, “I’ve learned that when something is wrong, to not bottle it up. Tell him.” Common to these examples is the perception by the participant that being in a relationship affected how she or he acted with that partner. However, changes in relating were not limited to the one relationship that nurtured the growth. For example, several participants felt that they had become more sensitive or more caring. Typifying this theme, a 21-year-old woman, “became more open and friendly to outside people,” through her friendship with another woman. Changes also involved assertiveness, as a 22-year-old woman reported that her romantic partner “encouraged me to stand up for myself more.” One respondent said, “now I am able to open up and show affection for those I love.” Describing his growth because of his romantic partner, a 22-year-old white male said that he “respects sex more.” He “gained a greater appreciation for sex,” and was able to deal with this subject “in a mature way,” suggesting that she helped him grow. Possible future romantic partners may appreciate what he calls a “whole new perspective.” In sum, participants’ communication with others changed, as they became more loving, more open, more assertive and so forth.

Changes in Self-Understanding. The second outcome of the self-building process was internally focused, reflecting respondents’ understanding of themselves. These were perceived changes in self-construals, such as self-esteem. In total, 29.7% of reported changes-in-self were of this second kind, and 67% of participants reported at least one instance of this reflective self-growth. Changes in the self that by definition require a second person, were

included in the first category, whereas changes in self-understanding can occur without affecting one's interaction with others. As an example, although improved self-esteem can affect how one relates to others, it does not inherently do so.

Quite commonly, participants felt that they became more optimistic and had "attitude changes" because of close relationships. Perceived changes in self-understanding included "I have more confidence," becoming "more goofy and silly," "I'm calmer, more relaxed," and becoming "more patient." One 21-year-old woman wrote that she has "become more comfortable with my large-frame body," because "my boyfriend loves every inch of me from my personality to my physical appearance." Self-understanding also changed in friendships, as reported by a 21-year-old male. His close friend's compliments (e.g., about his "work ethic" and "dress") positively affected his self-esteem. A 23-year-old woman said that she "used to get pissed off really easy and for stupid reasons and later not know why I was so mad," but had changed as a result of her four-year romantic relationship, noting that she "learned how to control [her] anger." In short, this second type of change in the self reflects participants' feeling that their identity or self-understanding had evolved due to a close personal tie.

Other Changes. Unlike the first two themes, the object of this final type of change is not people—neither a new perception of oneself nor a new view of others. Instead, relational partners perceived that their lives were enriched with other resources. These perceived effects of a close relationship involved a new or different outward orientation, including changes in beliefs (e.g., about fate), learning (e.g., a new language, about baseball), and attitudes (e.g., about one's career). A total of 17.6% of reported changes fit this third category, and 41.8% of participants reported at least one instance of this kind of change-in-self. For example, a 21-year-old woman, describing her cross-sex friend's effect on her, reported that she became stronger in her religious faith. He showed her "how to incorporate faith into [her] life." Another 21-year-old woman, reporting on her romantic relationship, noted that she became "more interested in politics, world issues, and global knowledge," because of her partner's interests. A 22-year-old man learned to "like cats more," because his new girlfriend "has two

cats and they sleep with us.” He reported that this change “seems a little silly, but I think animals help calm a person.” Thus, his new attitude towards cats affected who he is. The third type of change describes an evolving self in which one’s understanding of one’s place in the world or one’s understanding of the world expands. Even though this final theme includes changes that are internalized by the self, careers, languages, and such are clearly taken from the outside world. By contrast, the second theme characterizes self-reflective changes such as self-confidence and self-control. To summarize the findings for RQ₁: the self expands through new understandings of a) how to relate to others; b) itself; and c) its place in the world.

Valence. Responsive to the second research question, participants indicated whether changes were positive, negative or both positive and negative. As reflected in the results summarized above, the changes generally reflect growth of the self, with 65% of changes perceived positively. Participants also reported changing in negative ways due to a close relationship. Overall, a total of 14.7% of perceived changes-in-self were negative. The negative consequences of close relationships included jealousy, feeling trapped and enmeshed, spending so much time with their love that respondents lost touch with other friends, and emulating a friend’s bad habits. For example, describing a ten-year cross-sex friendship, a 21-year-old man reported his friend “convinces me to smoke at times with her.” Similarly, a 21-year-old woman said that she is “more likely to pull pranks on people,” because of her same-sex friend’s “ornery streak.”

In addition to the negative and positive changes, informants also reported changing in ways that were both positive and negative. A total of 20.1% of instances were simultaneously positive and negative. For example, one participant reported that she is “less willing to hide emotions, even if they’re negative.” She explained, “while displaying emotions can be healthy, I often do so at inappropriate times or in inappropriate places, because I am assured of my partner’s continued commitment.” In addition to recognizing the ways that openness can be both positive and negative, participants reported other polyvalent growth, such as becoming more competitive, less selfish, and more dependent on the partner.

Communication Processes

The primary purpose of the current study was to describe processes through which selves were changed (RQ₃). Inductive coding shows that perceived changes were brought about 1) through a communicative event; 2) by discovering similarities and differences between self and partner; and 3) because of the relationship itself. Table 2 lists the frequency for each process.

Table 2.
Examples and Frequency of Perceived Change Processes

Change Process	Examples	N
Communicative Event	Compliments. Visiting family. Conflict.	125
Similarity/Difference	He is more out-going than I. We are so alike, it's eerie.	69
Relationship	Enjoyed her company. Time and experience.	63
Uncodable	I am constantly thinking of others before myself.	22
Total		279

Communicative Event. Joint episodes, such as conversations, were seen as the primary avenue for constructing selves in personal relationships. These catalysts for change included receiving compliments, repeated positive interactions (e.g., “He is very understanding and a good listener”), shared activities (e.g., studying together), and more conflictual interactions (e.g., partner “considered breaking up with me”). A total of 44.8% of reported reasons for change were of this kind; a total of 76.9% of participants reported at least one instance of change-in-self attributed to a communicative event. One participant credited her growing family orientation to interaction with the partner’s family. She noted that “he is very close to his family and spends a great deal of time with them, and I have been along. I see how great it is and now want that with my family.” Communicative events also included less positive interactions, such as “There have been many times when I agreed to change plans because of his son,” and “I constantly hear people say how lucky I am to have a great guy...or how good

looking he is. After hearing it so much, I start to feel like they are implying that he is too good for me.” Also, sanctioning behaviour, such as “He’s crabby if I’m not easygoing, so I am,” contributed to change in the self.

For many of these changes, the respondent reacted to the partner’s lead, such as growing more secure because of the partner’s compliments. Inductive analysis revealed a difference between these interactions, which seemed to be initiated or controlled primarily by the partner and other events that had no clear distinction in responsibility. Communicative events with joint agency included participants attributing growth in the self to studying together and making plans. One female participant stated that, “she was able to talk to [her romantic partner] about stressful things in [her] life instead of letting [them] build up.” Training for reliability assessments of this dimension of communicative events was not successful; this failure may be due to the instrument which limited responses to brief descriptions of these events and did not ask participants for their perceptions of agency. Thus, all shared activities and other interactions were included as communicative events in this first domain, and no subcategories were measured.

The Dynamic of Similarity/Difference. Similarity and difference reflect a major theme characterizing participants’ understanding of the construction of selves in personal relationships. A total of 24.7% of attributed reasons for change were of this type. A total of 51.6% of participants reported at least one instance of this process phenomenon. The majority of these responses involved changing to be more like the partner (e.g., “She is very outgoing and I’ve learned to be more outgoing too.”). Participants reported becoming more trusting, more open, and more understanding because of the contrast between themselves and their partners. For example, one participant reflected that his girlfriend “lives a ‘free’ life and taught me to look at the simple pleasures and enjoy living.” Although most of the changes towards being more like the partner were perceived positively by respondents, some were not. A small number of these changes were viewed negatively, as in the following report about a friendship between two women. “I will go shopping with her and she thinks money grows on trees, so I start to deplete my bank account.” By spending more money than she

normally would, the respondent reported a negative evaluation of this change to become similar to her friend.

In addition to changes stemming from differences, participants occasionally found that their similarity fostered growth. For example, one female participant reported that she happily believes in fate, because her “whole relationship has just been a big coincidence. We are so alike, it’s eerie—we’re soulmates.” Thus, perceptions of self-formation due to similarities typically involved growth due to the discovery of important commonalities.

Relationship. While the majority of changes were linked to the above two themes, not all changes had such narrow and specific perceived sources. The final change process was the diffuse effects of being in the relationship. Participants neither identified a particular occurrence nor singled out qualities of their partner. Instead, informants saw themselves becoming different people due to the more ephemeral qualities of their relationships. A total of 22.6% of reported reasons for change-in-self belong to this third type; 48.4% of participants reported at least one instance of change attributable to this third category. Informants described three avenues for these gradual changes, including a) feelings for the partner; b) spending time with the partner; and c) unique aspects of the relationship itself.

When respondents focused on feelings as the source of change, they typically identified positive emotions, such as happiness and love. Examples of these responses include “wanting to show him how much he means to me,” “the comfort level [in our relationship] has increased,” and “he gives me all that a friendship could and more.” Second, relational change occurred due to the passage of time. Several participants pointed to spending time together as the source of a new or evolved self. Interestingly, time apart was also identified as a catalyst for growth. For example, a female participant reported that she changed because “I don’t always get to spend as much time with my boyfriend and my friends as I would like to.” Third, the unique qualities of particular relationships changed participants (e.g., “The exact nature of our relationship is what brings this about.”). One participant reported, “Because we are in a long-distance relationship, our time together is hard to come by. So, when his job allows him a break, I drop everything to spend time with

him.” This example illustrates the flexibility of the self, as Hermans (1992) and his colleagues described, “the [self] has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time” (p. 29). In sum, the third relational process was the ongoing, everyday interaction between parties, which functioned as a diffuse source of change, transforming parties gradually over time.

Whereas most participants were able to describe the process that changed them, 7.9% of their responses were not codable. We were unable to determine what happened to bring about these changes. Typically, respondents continued to describe what had changed, instead of explaining *how* it had occurred.

Discussion

Extending the SEM, this exploratory study was designed to describe the ways that close relationships are perceived to change the self. Based upon self-reports of participants' current relationships, the findings describe both the kinds of change and the relational processes that were seen as transforming the self. Qualitative analysis of self-growth resulted in three broad categories of change: 1) the conduct of relating; 2) self-construals; and 3) other growth. The majority of these changes were evaluated positively by participants, although the results also included negative and polyvalent changes. The attributed sources of transformation included three distinct processes: 1) specific communicative events; 2) discovering differences and similarities between self and partner; and 3) the diffuse nature of being in an ongoing relationship. The constitutive view of communication that was used to generate these results recognizes that cultural norms are reflected in relational practices. Because the sample was limited to North American college students, primarily European-American women, caution should be used in applying these results to relationships in other cultures. Nonetheless, commonalities with research of other cultural groupings (e.g., White's [2006] study of African-American men), suggest that these processes are not unique to this population.

Perceived Content of Change in the Self

In contrast to the vast majority of earlier research of the SEM (e.g., Mashek, Aron & Boncimino, 2003), the present investigation did not hypothesize and search for particular changes in the self. Rather, the study sought friends' and romantic partners' perceptions of the ways they changed due to a close relationship. This inductive design yielded the somewhat counter-intuitive finding that the conduct of relating (e.g., standing up to others, addressing problems) was the aspect of the self most commonly perceived to change. Thus, the first question to ask regarding the study's results is "do communicative changes in a relationship (e.g., dropping everything to spend time with partner) constitute a new or growing self?"

Several theoretical accounts of relational communication lend weight to participants' view that relating can be understood as part of the self. First, it should be no surprise that relationships affect what people do, given Capella's (1994) definition of a relationship as altered behaviour. Also, as Festinger (1957) pointed out many years ago, one's own behaviour shapes one's self-understanding. On one level, then, new ways of acting result in new ways of thinking that we could understand as a changed self. Considering Aron and his colleagues' (2004) view that close relationships involve "a Buberian view of Thou and I becoming one" (p. 102), a dialogic understanding of the self clarifies this finding of the current study. The current findings echo a study of cross-sex friendship; White (2006) found that participants' expanded self included new interpersonal skills (i.e., their communication changed). Thus, one practical implication of this finding is the potential for close relationships to help people learn new ways of relating and develop communication skills, such as overcome communication apprehension (cf. Martin & Myers, 2006). Furthermore, to take the study participants at their word, the results suggest that the self is, at least in part, what we do when we are communicating with close friends and romantic partners. This result underscores the significance that others play in the very fabric of how we view ourselves.

Given previous studies of self-change, the second and third most-commonly reported changes in the self were not unexpected. Self-concept is a dominant way of defining who one is, which supports the finding that close relationships affect self-understanding. Other resources were the third focus of new attitudes and understanding described in the study, changes that strongly reflect the process described by the SEM. For example, understanding politics increases one's efficacy in coping with social structures. These changes reflect self-expansion in that the self grows in its ability to cope with and interact with the environment. In short, the aspects of the self that changed included 1) the prototypical view of the self: how I see myself; 2) a less-typically understood aspect of the self: how I see my place in the world; and 3) a dialogic view of the self: how I relate to others.

Evaluating Change in the Self

The results reflected changes-in-self that were generally positive, which is a commonality with existing research (e.g., Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Dritogas, 2002). However, this process can have a stormy, troublesome side, as the results include negative changes in the self. The SEM, according to Aron et al. (2004), suggests that "Although integration necessarily expands the contents of the self (e.g., by making the previously unknown perspectives more available to the self), it seems reasonable to predict that undesirable aspects of close others are also integrated" (p. 116). More common than negative changes to the self, approximately one fifth of the self-growth in the current study was perceived to be simultaneously positive and negative. Phenomena that are both negative and positive reflect a unified opposition (Baxter & West, 2003; Brown, Werner & Altman, 1998), implying that change in the self should be investigated from a dialectical perspective. Perhaps the SEM could be combined with Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) Relational Dialectics to study change in the self.

Communicative Processes and the Self

The central goal of the current study was to explore links between relating and the self, and these results are the most noteworthy. These findings are based in self-reports, which are appropriate in that self-growth is difficult to assess with other methods. Although perceptions of communication are not the same as direct observations of interaction, the respondents have an invaluable perspective on themselves. The link between communication and changes in the self would be difficult to study through direct observation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the results are limited to insiders' perspectives of their relationships and their conclusions about the types of interactions and other processes that facilitated change in the self.

According to the respondents, selves grew through both mundane and memorable interactions (cf. Keeley, 2007; Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981) with a close friend or romantic partner. Events ranged from a big fight (cf. Siegert & Stamp, 1994) to shared everyday activities, such as studying together. Retrospectively identified communication has informed research into relational change (e.g., Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008), suggesting that retrospective methods are also valid for studying change in the self. Qualitative analysis of these events indicated that they differ along at least two dimensions: person(s) responsible and frequency (i.e., singular versus repeated interactions). However, the descriptions in this data set are brief, and due to this limitation, these distinctions were not coded reliably. Future research should collect more detailed descriptions of communicative events to allow deeper analysis of the interactions that shape the self.

The link between communication and the self extends the SEM. The study results suggest that a wide range of interactions in close relationships facilitate change in the self. Future scholarship based in this model should consider the relationship between communication and cognition. Further, the role of the social network within which a dyad resides should not be discounted. The present investigation shows that some events perceived to change the self involved communication between the close other and third parties, which seems beyond the present scope of the SEM. The communicative construction

of meaning in close relationships is a complex process and may be tied to the self in multiple ways. Perhaps greater awareness of this power of close ties to affect the self would foster increased respect for personal relationships.

The results of the current study suggest that perceived differences and similarities with partners are part of the ongoing process of forming and reforming the self. Although these perceived changes most commonly included becoming more like a partner, there were also changes brought about through the discovery of surprising range of similarities between self and other. In the case of the romantic relationships that predominate in the data, Bakhtin (1990) might suggest that even this similarity is framed by difference. What makes the discovery of a partner who seems so especially well suited to the self may be the surprise that this other, who is different in a number of ways (e.g., gender, experiences, etc.), has these particularly important similarities. It may be that the given such clear differences, the recognition of commonalities—finding the perfect match—facilitates self-expansion.

The data did not facilitate close examination of how difference and similarity functioned, and addressing this limitation is a direction for future research. Baxter and West (2003) suggest that difference and similarity weave together in complex ways, and that communication is an important element in enabling partners to realize their differences and similarities. The current study's findings join those of other recent work (e.g., Aron et al., 2006; Baxter & West, 2003) in underscoring the importance of taking difference seriously in new and well-established relationships. Difference is important not only because it is the base of most interpersonal conflict—a negatively-valenced function to many—but also because of its positive functionality in promoting self-growth in the relationship parties.

In conclusion, the current study differs from much research of personal relationships. Instead of analyzing the ways that individuals shape the relationships, the current study followed Aron and Aron's (2000) SEM by exploring processes through which selves are formed in close relationships. However, whereas the SEM research has emphasized the outcome of close relationships as changing "the very structure of the self" (Aron et al., 2004, p. 111), the present investigation, while preliminary, nonetheless adds to our

understanding of the relational processes that facilitate this structural change. The study's findings describe how compliments, conflicts, discovering the unique qualities of one's partner, and spending time together in shared activities were perceived to shape friends and romantic partners' understanding of themselves, including how they connect with others and their place in the world.

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