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**Finding the “I” in the “we”:  
Three modes of identity merger in close relationships**

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**Finding the “I” in the “we”:  
Three modes of identity merger in close relationships**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

To my dad, the first Dr. Kwang in my family. You moved to America to provide me with better educational opportunities and you've supported me through every milestone I've crossed. Your dedication to your work and your family is what inspires me to aim high and shoot for the stars in everything I do. You are my hero and my role model. I love you, Dad!

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**Finding the “I” in the “we”:  
Three modes of identity merger in close relationships**

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Abstract: Upon entering a relationship, individuals merge their identities with their partner’s identities to form a relational self. This proposal draws from the self-expansion and identity fusion theories to suggest three ways in which the identity merger process can unfold, with individuals either: losing their personal identities (forfeited-self mode), disproportionately influencing the relational self (imperialistic-self mode), or integrating their identities with their partner’s identities in a balanced manner (fused-self mode). I describe seven studies that aim to 1) validate a measure of these identity merger modes and explore their unique effects on personal and relational outcomes; and 2) investigate the nature of these identity merger modes. Studies 1, 2, and 3 assess discriminant and criterion validity of these identity merger modes. Studies 2 and 3 also test the hypothesis that feelings of personal agency statistically mediate the association of identity merger modes with relationship quality and responses to relationship threats and difficulties. Study 4 measures the longitudinal effects of identity merger modes in a newlywed sample through tracking how identity merger modes are linked to responses to relationship conflicts over the course of two weeks. Study 5 tests the causal effects of the identity merger modes on experimentally manipulated threats to the relationship and the partner. Study 6 explores how people’s construals about their partners and themselves differ among the identity merger modes using a reaction time task. Finally, Study 7 investigates more ecologically valid evidence of direction of influence within identity merger modes through assessing language use and verbal communication patterns between spouses. I predict that only the fused-self mode will be associated with positive relationship quality and resilience to relationship difficulties due to high personal agency within the relationship. Those in the forfeited-self mode would experience low agency within relationships and consequently internalize relationship difficulties. Finally, I predict that those in the imperialistic-self mode would respond maladaptively to relationship difficulties.

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## **Introduction**

The popular adage “two becomes one” suggests that relationships involve the merger of the identities of romantic partners. Yet such mergers are not always 50-50 propositions. Here, I propose three distinct modes whereby the identities of relationship partners can merge in the construction of a relational self (i.e., the self in the relationship). In “forfeited-self” identity mergers, people perceive that they have relinquished their identity in the process of constructing a relational self. In “imperialistic-self” mergers, people feel that their own identities have disproportionately influenced the relational self. In “fused-self” identity mergers, people feel that the identities of both partners have equally influenced the relational self. I explore the nature, antecedents, and consequences of each of these modes in the current studies.

### **Perspectives on Identity Mergers in Relationships**

At the outset of their relationships, one of people’s first orders of business is to negotiate the identities that each person will assume (Schlenker, 1984; Swann & Bosson, 2008). Often, this negotiation process leads partners to redefine themselves, in some sense merging aspects of their own identity with their partner’s identity (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Berger & Kellner, 1964). *Self-expansion theory* has offered one important perspective on such identity mergers.

### **Self-Expansion Theory**

Self-expansion theory (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) proposes that upon entering a relationship, individuals “expand” their own identities by incorporating their partner into their identity structure. In fact, people may even internalize their partners’ traits and values. In one study, for example, persons who had recently fallen in love



described themselves using attributes that had previously been unique to their partners (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). This work has made the important contribution of systematically demonstrating how relationship outcomes are shaped by “closeness”: that is, the *degree* to which the identities of partners overlap (e.g., Aron et al., 1992, 1995; see also Linardotos & Lydon, 2011).

Conspicuously absent within this research tradition has been consideration of the significance of *how* the identities of partners merge. That is, while closeness between partners has been shown to be extremely important, the chain of events that lead to closeness may also be important. Consider, for example, two high-profile relationships of the Hollywood actor, Ben Affleck. “Bennifer” was the term used by the media to encapsulate the merger of Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez into a single identity, in which Affleck morphed from the laid-back, casual boy next door into a swanky, Armani-clad, red-carpet icon. Notably, Affleck took on many of Lopez’s attributes at the expense of his own attributes, resulting in an identity more akin to Lopez than himself. Furthermore, their relationship quickly fell victim to the pressures of media scrutiny, which they both later blamed for the demise of their relationship.

When Affleck later moved on to Jennifer Garner to form what the media quickly dubbed “Bennifer 2.0,” he abruptly transformed once again. This time, Affleck adopted many of Garner’s attributes while retaining some of his own attributes (e.g., scruffy, unpretentious). The tendency for Affleck to retain his personal self in his relationship with Garner seems to have had important consequences. For example, he appears to enjoy relatively high levels of satisfaction with her, and the relationship (thus far) has withstood difficulties such as public criticisms and scrutiny. In short, although Affleck appeared to be quite close to his partner in both versions of

“Bennifer,” the relationships differed markedly in the prominence of his chronic personal identity in forming each “Bennifer”.

In the spirit of the Bennifer example, I suggest that what happens to the personal self when people merge identities to form a relational self can influence relationship quality, as well as the ability to respond adaptively to relationship difficulties and threats. I am particularly interested in three distinct modes of relationship merger. While these merger modes have received little if any attention in previous research, recent themes in the groups literature may provide useful insights into their nature and consequences. Specifically, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and identity fusion theory (Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, in press) feature different modes through which personal identities can merge with group identities. To a degree, the processes featured in these approaches may parallel those that unfold in when close relationship partners form a relational self.

### **Group Identification, Identity Fusion and Modes of Identity Merger**

Theorists (e.g., James, 1890; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) have long distinguished the personal self from the social self. Whereas the personal self refers to idiosyncratic properties of individuals (e.g., “intelligent,” or “sociable”), the social self refers to those aspects of self associated with group membership (e.g., “Catholic,” or “American”). The two theories of interest here-- group identification and identity fusion—make very different assumptions regarding what happens when the personal and social self merge. On the one hand, social identity approaches (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) assume that the personal and social selves are *functionally antagonistic*, such that the salience of the social identity is hydraulically related

to the salience of the personal identity. For example, when a woman's social identity as a saleswoman is salient and influential, her personal identity as shy will recede and be less influential. From this vantage point, then, the merger of identities involves a unidirectional influence process in which one identity tends to override the other identity. Both the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes introduced above feature just such a unidirectional influence process.

In contrast, identity fusion theory (Swann et al., in press) assumes that the personal and social selves may combine synergistically, allowing each to retain its integrity and remain salient and viable. Within this framework, the salience and viability of a woman's social identity as a saleswoman does not preclude the salience and viability of her many personal identities. As such, when people fuse with a group, their personal identities may remain potent despite a visceral feeling of being "one with" the group. In support of this assumption, among fused persons, activating their personal self-views was just as effective in amplifying pro-group behavior as activating their social self-views (e.g., Gomez, Brooks, Buhrmester, Vázquez, Jetten, & Swann, 2011; Swann et al., 2009). The fused-self merger mode introduced above exemplifies this phenomenon in that the identities of both partners are assumed to remain viable and potent when they form a relationship.

Therefore, although developed to illuminate group processes, social identity theory and identity fusion theory may each highlight a form of identity merger that may have parallels within the domain of close relationships. Specifically, as shown in Table 1, just as social identity theory emphasizes the unidirectional influence process featured in the forfeited-self and

imperialistic-self modes, identity fusion theory emphasizes the bi-directional influence process featured in the fused-self mode. These three modes are described in further detail below.

Characteristic	Forfeited-Self	Imperialistic-Self	Fused-Self
Direction of influence	Unidirectional (partner to relational self)	Unidirectional (self to relational self)	Bidirectional
Personal agency	Low	High	High
Connectedness	High	Low	High
Adaptive response to conflict	No	No	Yes
Compensatory behaviors during threat	No	No	Yes
Satisfaction	Low	Neither	High
Commitment	High	Low	High

Table 1: Theoretical Characteristics of Identity Merger Modes

### **Three Modes of Identity Merger**

#### **The Forfeited-Self Mode**

In the forfeited-self mode, individuals feel that they have relinquished their personal identities in the formation of their relational self. This loss of personal identity necessarily reduces one’s sense of personal agency (Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010). In turn, a lack of agency may undermine efforts to overcome threats and difficulties in the relationship, resulting in lower relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, as the loss of the relationship would require the individual to reconstitute the self, individuals in the forfeited self mode should express strong commitment to their relationships.

### **The Imperialistic-Self Mode**

In the imperialistic-self mode, individuals feel that their own identities play a more powerful role in shaping the relational self than the identities of the partner. As such, activating the individual's relational self is nearly psychologically equivalent to activating the personal self. This disconnect of the relational self from the partner suggests that imperialistic-self persons may respond to their partner as do two ships passing in the night: they may not be motivated to engage in efforts to overcome threats and difficulties in the relationship, and their commitment to the relationship may remain low.

### **The Fused-Self Mode**

Finally, individuals in the fused-self mode feel that both partners are contributing substantially to the relational self. Such individuals are actively engaged in the relationship and feel highly agentic; in fact, their connection with their partners may help to boost their personal agency in the relationship. Consequently, they may spring into action on behalf of their relationships, adaptively responding to threats and difficulties in their relationships. They may also remain strongly committed to the relationship and express high levels of satisfaction with it.

I must emphasize that the three modes of identity merger reflect people's *construals* of their relationships rather than objective characteristics of the relationships. As such, both partners in a relationship may regard themselves to be in the forfeited-self mode; both may believe that they are in the imperialistic-self mode; one may believe that they are in the forfeited mode while the other believes that they are in the fused mode, and so on.

### **Overview of studies**

The goal of the current research was to explore the nature and consequences of three modes of relationship identity merger. I have organized my studies into two main categories. The first set of studies developed and validated a measure of these identity merger modes. Studies 1 through 3, developed and validated a pictorial measure of these modes. I assessed discriminant and criterion validity, particularly with regard to the constructs of power and dominance. I also tested the hypothesis that feelings of personal agency would statistically mediate the association of identity merger modes with measures of relationship quality and responses to relationship threats and difficulties.<sup>1</sup> Study 4, replicated the findings from Studies 2 and 3 in a newlywed sample, and explored the longitudinal effects of these merger modes through collecting daily diaries about relationship quality and responses to relationship threats and difficulties. Finally, Study 5 assessed how the identity merger modes predicted responses to relationship threats by experimentally manipulating relational versus partner threats. The second set of studies focused on testing whether the identity merger modes differed in direction of influence between partners. Study 6 used a reaction time task to measure the link between identity merger modes and the salience of self-attributes versus partner-attributions. Study 7, assessed verbal communication patterns between spouses to gather behavioral evidence of identity merger with the partner, as well as partner influence on the relational self.

### **Study 1**

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<sup>1</sup> All mediational analyses relied on data collected from a single session. As such, the analyses can determine *statistical mediation* rather than true mediation. The term *statistical mediation* means that Variable *M* may account for some of the variance of Outcome *Y* associated with Variable *X*, instead of claiming that *X* causes *M* which then in turn causes *Y*. Although statistical mediation is a necessary condition for true mediation, it is not sufficient to determine true mediation.

The goal of Study 1 was threefold. The first goal was to develop and assess a pictorial measure that was designed to measure modes of relationship identity merger. The second goal was to assess the discriminant validity of the scale against the related concepts of influence, power, dominance, and egalitarian beliefs. Finally, participants rated their previous relationships to test whether these modes were person-specific versus relationship-specific.

### **Influence, Power, and Dominance**

For the purpose of clarity, in my dissertation I use *influence* as a descriptive term that indicates the degree to which events or decisions for an individual are causally connected to events or decision of his or her partner (see Huston, 1983). *Dominance* is also a descriptive term that refers to whether influence is symmetrical or asymmetrical in the relationship. Specifically, if one partner tends to have more influence than the other, the first partner is said to hold more dominance in the relationship. If both partners influence one another equally, they are said to hold equal dominance. Finally, *power* is a person's ability to achieve ends through intentional influence. While influence and dominance describe the relationship itself, power is an individual difference that provides an explanation for why influence is asymmetrical.

Huston argues that 1) while power explains intentional influence in the relationship, underlying causes of *unintentional* influence have yet to be explored; and 2) there are unexplored relationship-specific factors that underlie general influence/dominance in the relationship. I argue that identity influence is a form of unintentional influence that may contribute to dominance differences in the relationship, and that the manner in which identities merge can be an unexplored relationship-specific factor that underlie general influence and dominance dynamics within relationship. That is, the identity merger modes allow the capacity for

asymmetrical influence within relationships. As such, I expect that a) the forfeited-self mode should be negatively linked to dominance, the imperialistic-self mode should be positively linked to dominance, and the fused-self mode to be linked to bidirectional dominance (or equal influence). Because I believe that the identity merger modes are specific to identity and thus *unintentional* influence within relationships, their correlations with power items should be weaker than their correlations with dominance.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Two hundred and nine participants (mean age = 32.92 S.D. = 12.05; Range = 18-79) participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The only inclusion criterion was that participants were currently in romantic relationships. Participant received \$0.25 for participation. Mean relationship length was 6.40 years (S.D. = 8.13; Range = 1 mo - 51 yrs). The final sample included 129 females (61.7%).

### **Measures**

**Identity Merger Modes.** Participants completed an animated pictorial scale on a computer. As seen in Appendix A, the scale depicted the three modes through which the personal self can merge with the partner self. Model A referred to the forfeited-self mode, Model B referred to the fused-self mode, and Model C referred to the imperialistic-self mode. Participants rated how much each mode captured their construal of their relationships using a 7-point Likert scale (1=*does not describe me at all*, 7 = *describes me greatly*). Participants rated their current relationships, as well as up to three of their previous relationships.



**Identity Prominence and Dominance.** Participants also completed two 7-item verbal items I created. As seen in Appendix B, the first item measured the prominence of the personal versus partner identity in the relational self (i.e., “My own identity is always the most prominent in our relationship”). The item were measured using a 7-point Likert scale with -3 indicating greater partner prominence, and +3 indicating greater self prominence. The second item measured dominance difference between identities within the relationship (i.e., “I always try to be who my partner wants me to be”). Again, the item was measured using a 7-point Likert scale with -3 indicating greater partner, and +3 indicating greater self dominance.

**Power.** To demonstrate that identity merger modes were distinct from power, participants also completed a measure of relationship power (e.g., “In your relationship, who has more power?” (Wang, Wang, & Hsu, 2006). Items were measured on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *My partner*, 7 = *Me*), with higher scores indicating greater power.

**Egalitarian Sex Role Attitudes.** To test the link between identity merger modes and egalitarian attitudes, participants also completed a measure of egalitarian sex role attitudes (Uji, Shono, Shikai, Hiramura, & Kitamura, 2006). The scale contained 15 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*), and higher scores indicated more egalitarian attitudes. Example items included “Important issues should be decided by husbands” and “Women should not get a job with responsibility and competition”.

## **Results and Discussion**

**Descriptive Statistics.** Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for all the variables measured and Table 3 shows the correlations between the indices of identity merger modes and the related concepts of influence, power, dominance, and egalitarian beliefs. The fused-self mode

was negatively correlated with both the forfeited-self mode and the imperialistic-self mode. The forfeited-self mode was not significantly correlated with the imperialistic-self mode.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		$\alpha$
			Potential	Actual	
Identity Merger Modes					
Fused-Self	5.6	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Forfeited-Self	2.7	1.8	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Imperialistic-Self	2.7	1.8	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Identity Prominence	4.2	1.0	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Identity Dominance	3.7	1.1	1-7	1.0-6.0	
Power	1.8	.64	0-4	0.7-4.0	.70
Egalitarian Beliefs	3.96	.70	1-5	2.1-5.0	.90

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Study 1

The identity merger modes were not significantly correlated with any demographic variables, including age, gender, and length of relationship. Whereas those who scored high on the fused-self mode tended to have more egalitarian beliefs than their less-fused counterparts, the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes were not significantly linked to egalitarian beliefs.

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Fused-Self	-									
2. Forfeited-Self	-.40***	-								
3. Imperialistic-Self	-.37***	.09	-							
4. ID Prominence	-.09	-.39***	.47***	-						
5. ID Dominance	-.05	-.26***	.20**	.41***	-					
6. Power	-.10	-.38***	.38***	.57***	.50***	-				
7. Egalitarian	-.16*	-.03	-.04	-.04	-.01	-.06	-			
8. Age	.10	-.03	-.06	-.06	.01	-.05	-.01	-		
9. Gender	.14	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.10	.06	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.13 <sup>†</sup>	.14*	-.07	-	
10. Rel. length	.05	-.01	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.00	-.10	.60***	.12 <sup>†</sup>	-

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 3: Study 1 Correlations

Because egalitarian beliefs are so closely tied to gender, I created an interaction term for each of the three merger modes with gender. I then regressed egalitarian beliefs on gender, the identity merger modes, and their interaction terms. There was a significant interaction between gender and the fused-self mode,  $\beta = -.29, p = .016$ , in that the fused-self mode was positively linked to egalitarian beliefs for males only,  $\beta = .50, p < .001$ . A similar pattern appeared for the interaction between gender and the forfeited-self mode,  $\beta = -.22, p = .038$ , in that the forfeited-self mode was positively linked to egalitarian beliefs for males only,  $\beta = .35, p = .006$ . Finally, there was a significant interaction between gender and the imperialistic-self mode,  $\beta = .28, p = .034$ , in that the imperialistic-self mode was negatively linked to egalitarian beliefs for males only,  $\beta = -.25, p = .018$ . For females, scores on the fused-self, forfeited-self, and imperialistic-self modes were not significantly linked to egalitarian beliefs  $\beta$ 's = .03, -.03, .07, respectively,  $p$ 's > .488. That is, for females, egalitarian beliefs were not associated with scores on their identity merger modes. For males, however, highly fused-self and forfeited-self participants tended to hold strong egalitarian beliefs. Highly imperialistic-self participants, however, tended to hold weak egalitarian beliefs.

Recall that for the identity and dominance measures, low (negative) scores should indicate partner influence, high (positive) scores should indicate self influence, and a score of zero should indicate equal influence. Thus, to capture the link between the fused-self mode and equal influence, scores for identity prominence, identity power, and dominance were squared so that low scores on the squared items would indicate bidirectional influence. Indeed forfeited-self mode was negatively correlated with identity prominence, identity power, and dominance, the imperialistic-self mode was positively correlated with identity prominence, identity power, and

dominance; and the pictorial measure of the fused-self mode was not significantly correlated with identity prominence, identity power, and dominance, but was negatively correlated with the squared terms of those variables.

### **Discriminant validity between Identity Merger Modes and Power.**

Recall my argument that identity merger modes refer to self /partner identity prominence in the relational self, and that the merger modes are distinct from dominance as they provide the capacity for dominance in the relationship. Furthermore, identity merger modes reflect unintentional influence rather than intentional influence; thus, dominance should be more strongly correlated to the merger modes than power. To compare the strength of the relationship between the merger modes and identity prominence, identity dominance, and power, each of the three merger modes were regressed on identity prominence, identity dominance, and power.

Indeed, the forfeited-self mode was negatively linked to identity prominence and identity dominance ( $\beta = -.25, p = .002$  and  $\beta = -.22, p = .008$ , respectively). Furthermore, when variance attributed to identity dominance and identity prominence was accounted for, the forfeited-self mode was no longer significantly linked to power ( $\beta = -.05, p = .510$ ). Likewise, the imperialistic-self mode was positively linked to identity prominence and identity dominance ( $\beta = .38, p = .000$  and  $\beta = .19, p = .019$ , respectively). Furthermore, when the variance attributed to identity dominance and identity prominence was accounted for, the imperialistic-self mode was no longer significantly linked to power ( $\beta = -.05, p = .475$ ). Finally, the fused-self mode was negatively linked to the squared term for identity prominence and identity dominance ( $\beta = -2.26, p = .000$  and  $\beta = -.74, p = .011$ , respectively). Again, when the variance attributed to identity

dominance and identity prominence was accounted for, the forfeited-self mode was no longer significantly linked to the squared term for power ( $\beta = -.06, p = .320$ ).

### **Did the Identity Merger Modes Differ Across Relationships?**

Tables 4a-c show the correlations among the identity merger modes for the current versus previous relationships. To control for possible hindsight biases or for differences in the nature of the relationship break-ups, I controlled for the length of the relationships, the amount of time since the break-up, as well as who ended the relationship (self, partner, or mutual). For the most part, the correlations were not statistically significant, indicating that scores on the identity merger modes for previous relationships did not predict the scores of the current relationship. The only exception was that identity merger mode scores tended to be more strongly correlated among consecutive relationships than non-consecutive relationships. Still, the data suggest that these identity merger modes are relationship-specific rather than person-specific. Controlling for factors such as relationship length, time since breakup, and who initiated the relationship does not seem to affect the outcomes.

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Current	-	-.16+	-.07	-.07
2. Previous	-.13	-	.21+	.10
3. 2 Relationships Prior	-.02	.17	-	.62**
4. 3 Relationships Prior	-.21	-.04	.64*	-

†  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Note:* Correlations below the diagonal control for relationship length, time since breakup, and who ended relationship. Correlations above the diagonal do not control for these factors.

Table 4a: Correlations for Fused-Self Mode

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Current	-	-.06	.06	.21
2. Previous	-.04	-	.17	-.02
3. 2 Relationships Prior	.07	.21	-	.31
4. 3 Relationships Prior	.16	-.03	.40	-

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note:* Correlations below the diagonal control for relationship length, time since breakup, and who ended relationship. Correlations above the diagonal do not control for these factors.

Table 4b: Correlations for Forfeited-Self Mode

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Current	-	.16 <sup>†</sup>	-.07	.16
2. Previous	.16 <sup>†</sup>	-	.37**	.22
3. 2 Relationships Prior	-.02	.38**	-	.50*
4. 3 Relationships Prior	.20	.23	.49 <sup>†</sup>	-

† $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note:* Correlations below the diagonal control for relationship length, time since breakup, and who ended relationship. Correlations above the diagonal do not control for these factors.

Table 4c: Correlations for Imperialistic-Self Mode

In sum, the identity merger modes were more highly correlated to the verbal measure of identity prominence and identity dominance than power. Furthermore, when identity prominence and dominance were accounted for, the merger modes were not linked to power, suggesting that the merger modes were more strongly linked to unintentional influence rather than intentional influence in relationships.

## Study 2

Study 2 further assessed the discriminant and convergent validity of my scales. Specifically, it tested the prediction that merger modes would be distinct from indices of self-other overlap. It also examined possible associations between the merger modes and individuals'

attachment bonds with their partner (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987) to distinguish my current modes from other types of relational bonds. I expected to see significant links between the merger modes and attachment styles, but I also expected these links would not be of a magnitude to suggest overlapping concepts. Rather, attachment styles and identity merger modes should retain independent predictive power on relational processes as attachment styles do not capture self-construals within relationships, but instead measure trust, beliefs, and expectations about relationship partners. Finally, Study 2 explored potential linkages between the modes and personality variables.

Study 2 then tested whether the identity merger modes predicted relationship quality while controlling for other measures of relational bonds (i.e., self-other overlap, attachment styles). I hypothesized that: the fused-self mode would be positively linked to both relationship satisfaction and commitment; the forfeited-self mode would be negatively linked to relationship satisfaction but positively linked to commitment level; the imperialistic-self mode would not be associated with relationship satisfaction, and negatively linked to commitment.

Finally, Study 2 examined if agency statistically mediated the impact of merger mode on relationship quality. I expected that high levels of agency among fused-self participants would facilitate compensatory activity in the wake of relationship threats, allowing them to maintain high levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment. In contrast, I predicted that low levels of agency among forfeited-self participants would diminish their capacity to take action against relationship threats, resulting in the internalization of those threats and decreased relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, because such individuals relinquish their personal self to the relationship, these individuals may remain highly committed to the relationship despite their



lowered satisfaction (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Finally, I expected that the tendency of imperialistic-self participants to withdraw psychologically from the relational self would result in low levels of commitment to the relationship, agency toward the relationship, and compensatory activity.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Two hundred fifty-six participants (mean age = 31.86; S.D. = 10.02; Range = 18-68) participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The only inclusion criterion was that participants were currently in romantic relationships. Participants received \$0.30 for participation.

Mean relationship length was 6.76 years (S.D. = 7.72; Range = 1 month-43 years). The sample included 112 participants who were dating, 19 participants who were engaged, 119 participants who were married, and 16 who did not indicate their relationship type. The final sample included 148 females (61.4%). Most (82.2%) were Caucasian.

### **Measures**

**Identity Merger Modes.** Participants completed the same measure as in Study 1.

**Other Measures of Relational Bonds.** To demonstrate that identity merger modes are distinct from the degree of self-other overlap, participants also completed the Inclusion of Others in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992), which is a single-item pictorial measure that illustrates varying levels of closeness between the self and other, as well as the Relationship Interdependence Self-Construal Scale (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000), which measures how much individuals generally include close others in their self-construal (e.g., In general, my close

relationships are an important part of my self-image). To demonstrate that identity merger modes are distinct from attachment bonds, participants completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992), which measures both anxious (e.g., “I often worry that my partner(s) don’t really love me”) and avoidant attachment (e.g., “I don’t like people getting too close to me”).

**Relationship Agency.** A latent term was created indicating relationship agency by combining the measures of Relationship Power (Wang et al., 2006), and Relationship Autonomy (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Relationship power measures the amount of influence individuals effectively exert in their relationships (e.g., “I can persuade my partner not to do the things I don’t want”; “When talking to my partner about an important issue that concerns both of us, I let him/her know my opinions.”) Relationship autonomy measures how much free will individuals are able to exercise in their relationships (e.g., “When I am in a romantic relationship, I feel free to be who I am.”). I also correlated the modes with these two scales separately to examine whether the modes were distinct from these two constructs.

**Personality Variables.** Participants completed measures of self-esteem (SLCS-revised, Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), narcissism (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2005), and the Big Five personality traits (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).

**Relationship Quality.** Global relationship satisfaction was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007). An example item includes “My relationship with my partner makes me happy.” Commitment was measured using the dedication subscale of

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<sup>2</sup> We created 6 additional items such as “When I am in a romantic relationship, I feel that I have the freedom to reach my full potential,” and “When I am in a romantic relationship, I feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways.”

the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), which assesses commitment that arises from psychological investment in the partner (e.g., “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.”)

Variable	Study 2					Study 3					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		$\alpha$	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		$\alpha$	
			Potential	Actual				Potential	Actual		
Merger Modes											
Fused-Self	5.6	1.4	1-7	1.0-7.0		5.4	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0		
Forfeited-Self		3.2	1.9	1-7	1.0-7.0		3.4	2.0	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Imperialistic-Self		3.1	1.8	1-7	1.0-7.0		3.3	1.8	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Other Measures of Relational Bonds											
IOS		4.9	1.5	1-7	1.0-7.0		4.6	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Interdependence		4.7	1.4	0-8	0.9-8.0	.91					
Avoidant Attachment	3.8	1.2	1-7	1.0-7.0	.84	3.7	1.3	1-7	1.0-6.8	.88	
Anxious Attachment	3.8	.96	1-7	1.0-6.3	.87	3.5	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0	.86	
Measures of Agency											
Power		3.6	.60	1-5	1.6-5.0	.69	3.6	.67	1-5	1.6-5.0	.76
Autonomy	4.5	.87	1-7	2.0-6.9	.78	4.6	.96	1-7	1.0-7.0	.81	
Relationship Efficacy						24.1	6.2	7-35	7.0-35.0	.88	
Individual Differences											
Openness	5.0	1.2	1-7	1.0-7.0	.44						
Conscientiousness	4.8	1.2	1-7	1.0-7.0	.54						
Extraversion		3.5	4.5	1-7	1.0-7.0	.68					
Agreeableness		4.9	1.2	1-7	1.0-7.0	.43					
Neuroticism		3.6	1.5	1-7	1.0-7.0	.71					
Narcissism	.30	.21	0-1	0.0-0.9	.75						
Self-Liking		3.3	.87	1-5	1.1-5.0	.90					
Self-Competence		3.2	.63	1-5	1.0-5.0	.82					
Conflict Responses											
Voice						6.3	1.7	1-9	1.0-9.0		
Exit						3.0	2.0	1-9	1.0-9.0		
Neglect						3.5	1.9	1-9	1.0-9.0		
Blame						44.6	13.8	12-84	12.0-84.0	.91	
Forgiveness						25.5	5.6	6-36	6.0-36.0	.79	
Relationship Quality											
Satisfaction		57.6	10.4	0-96	9.0-79.0						
Commitment		5.1	.99	1-7	2.3-6.9						

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Studies 2 and 3

## Results and Discussion

**Descriptive Statistics.** Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for all the variables measured and Table 6 shows the correlations between my indices of identity merger modes. As in Study 1, the fused-self mode was negatively correlated with both the forfeited-self mode and the imperialistic-self mode. The forfeited-self mode was not significantly correlated with the imperialistic-self mode.

	Study 2			Study 3		
	Fused	Forfeit	Imperial	Fused	Forfeit	Imperial
<b>Merger Modes</b>						
Fused-Self	-			-		
Forfeited-Self	-.29**	-		-.37**	-	
Imperialistic-Self	-.24**	-.09	-	-.17*	-.12**	-
<b>Other Measures of Relational Bonds</b>						
IOS	.11 <sup>+</sup>	.02	-.05	.04	.02	.01
Interdepend	.03	.03	-.03			
Anxious	-.28**	.22**	.04	-.23**	.27**	.07
Avoidant	-.17**	.20**	.05	-.15*	.21**	.13*
<b>Measures of Agency</b>						
Power	.28**	-.19**	.05	.34**	-.31**	-.05
Autonomy	.39**	-.26**	.04	.38**	-.32**	-.15*
Efficacy				.35**	-.32**	-.16*

<sup>+</sup>p < .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

Table 6: Correlations between Identity Merger Modes and Other Measures of Relational Bonds

## **Discriminant and Convergent Validity: Did the Identity Merger Modes Tap Unique Constructs?**

Table 6 shows the correlations among my indices of identity merger modes and other measures of relational bonds. All these correlations were small to moderate, indicating that the modes capture a new and unique construct. In fact, the highest correlation ( $r = -.28$ ) was with anxious attachment style. As expected, none of the identity merger modes significantly correlated with measures of self-other overlap including the IOS and relationship interdependence. Furthermore, the correlations with IOS and relationship interdependence did not differ among the identity merger modes, supporting the idea that the modes differ in direction of influence rather than degree in self-other overlap. Participants who scored high on the fused-self mode reported lower avoidant and anxious attachment than their less-fused counterparts, while those who scored high on the forfeited-self mode reported greater avoidant and anxious attachment than their less-forfeited counterparts.

Table 6 also shows the correlations among my indices of identity merger modes and measures of agency. As expected, those who scored high on the fused-self mode reported experiencing more agency in their relationships than their less-fused counterparts, while those who scored high on the forfeited-self mode reported experiencing less agency than their less-forfeited counterparts. Contrary to my expectations, there was no correlation between the imperialistic-self mode and agency, an issue I will address below.

Finally, Table 7 shows the correlations among the indices of identity merger modes and individual difference variables. All of these correlations were modest, with none exceeding  $r = .20$ . Those high on the fused-self mode reported greater self-liking, were more agreeable,

conscientious, and open, and were less neurotic than those who were low. Those high on the forfeited-self mode reported less self-liking and were less extraverted than those who were low. Finally, those high on the imperialistic-self mode were less agreeable than those who were low.

Individual Differences	Fused-Self	Forfeited-Self	Imperialistic-Self
<b>Self-Esteem</b>			
Self-Liking	.19**	-.15*	.06
Self-Competence	.07	-.08	.01
Narcissism	-.09	-.04	.11
<b>Big-Five Personality Traits</b>			
Extraversion	.09	-.13*	-.02
Agreeableness	.20**	.01	-.18**
Conscientiousness	.17**	-.10	-.03
Neuroticism	-.16*	-.01	.03
Openness	.18**	-.04	-.01

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 7: Study 2 Correlations with Individual Differences

My findings offer convergent and discriminant validity for my measures of identity merger modes. Correlations between the modes and other measures of relational bonds (e.g., self-other overlap and attachment styles) were fairly low.

### **Did the Identity Merger Modes Uniquely Predict Relationship Quality?**

Having established the discriminant and convergent validity of my measures of identity merger modes, I next aimed to determine whether my measures predicted unique variance in

relationship quality using structural equation modeling with Mplus 6.0. I first centered each of the predictor variables, then fit a theory-based structural equation model that tested the effects of the modes on indices of relationship quality controlling for demographics variables (age, race, relationship length, gender) and related relationship variables (IOS, interdependence, and attachment styles). Fit indices are found in Table 8. Standardized parameters are found under the “Total Effects” column in Table 9.

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	AIC	CFI	RMSEA
Study 2					
Main effects on Relationship Quality					
Satisfaction	13.18	12	7901.701	.98	.02
Commitment	3.49	6	5350.56	1.0	.00
Tests of Statistical Mediation					
Satisfaction	37.60	24	8745.59	.95	.02
Commitment	18.98	13	6178.14	.98	.04
Study 3					
Accommodation	15.17	10	8011.81	.99	.04
Blame	12.23	9	8487.46	1.0	.04
Forgiveness	40.37*	25	12539.95	.98	.05

Table 8: Goodness-of-Fit Indicators for Studies 2 and 3

**Global satisfaction.** As hypothesized, scores on the fused-self mode were positively linked to relationship satisfaction. Satisfaction was independent of scores on both the forfeited-self mode and imperialistic-self mode.

**Commitment.** Again, as hypothesized, scores on the fused-self mode and the forfeited-self mode were positively linked to relationship commitment. Contrary to my predictions, however, the imperialistic-self mode was not related to relationship commitment.



Parameter	Total Effects		Direct Effects		Mediated Effects		Mediator Type
	Standardized parameter estimate	S.E.	Standardized parameter estimate	S. E.	Standardized parameter estimate	S. E.	
Global Satisfaction							
Fused-Self	.26***	.07	.07	.07	.18***	.05	Full
Forfeited-Self	.02	.06	.11+	.06			
Imperialistic-Self	-.02	.06	-.02	.06			
Commitment							
Fused-Self	.14*	.06	-.11+	.07	.25**	.06	Full
Forfeited-Self	.21***	.05	.21***	.05			None
Imperialistic-Self	-.08	.05	-.08	.05			

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note.* In Mplus, the significance of the mediated effects is the significance of the mediation. Moreover, if the mediated effect is significant and the direct effect is not, full mediation is indicated.

Table 9: Study 2 Tests of Statistical Mediation

For the most part, the foregoing results confirmed predictions. Participants who scored high on the fused-self mode reported greater relationship satisfaction and commitment than their less-fused counterparts, while high forfeited-self participants reported greater relationship commitment but not satisfaction than their less-forfeited counterparts. Surprisingly, on the index of relationship commitment, those who scored high on the index of imperialistic-self did not differ from those who scored low. It is possible that commitment for highly imperialistic-self participants ebbs and flows with their relationship satisfaction. As satisfaction was neither high nor low for highly imperialistic-self participants, their commitment levels may follow suit.

### **Did agency mediate the link between identity merger modes and relationship quality?**

To test for mediation, the same models were run as above, but this time agency was added as the mediator of the link between identity merger modes and relationship quality.<sup>3</sup> All parameters are shown in Table 9. For relationship satisfaction, mediation tests were run on the fused-self mode only, as it was the only mode to significantly predict relationship satisfaction. For relationship commitment, mediation tests were run for only the fused-self and forfeited-self modes.

**Global satisfaction.** Scores on the fused-self mode were positively linked to relationship satisfaction. As hypothesized, the indirect effect indicated that agency significantly mediated that link. Finally, the link between fused-self mode and satisfaction was no longer significant when

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<sup>3</sup> For all mediation analyses, I reversed the direction of statistical mediation and ran separate analyses with relationship quality as the mediator, and agency as the outcome. Relationship quality did not significantly fully mediate the relationship between identity merger modes and agency. I also ran a separate analysis with agency as the predictor, identity merger modes as the mediator and relationship quality as the outcome. The modes did not significantly mediate the relationship between agency and relationship quality.

controlling for agency, indicating that agency fully mediated the link between fused-self mode and relationship satisfaction.

**Commitment.** Highly fused-self participants reported experiencing greater relationship commitment than their less-fused counterparts. As hypothesized, the indirect effect indicated that agency significantly mediated that link. Finally, the link between fused-self mode and commitment was no longer positively related when controlling for agency; in fact, the direction of the link flipped, indicating that fused-self participants' high sense of agency was crucial to their commitment to their relationships. For highly forfeited-self participants, both total and direct effects indicated they also reported experiencing greater relationship commitment than their non-forfeited counterparts. Thus, agency did not mediate this link, indicating that forfeited-self participants remained committed regardless of self-reported agency.

In sum, the results supported predictions. Highly fused-self participants reported greater personal agency toward the relationship than their less-fused counterparts, and it was through agency that they were able to experience greater relationship satisfaction and commitment. Although highly forfeited-self participants reported higher commitment levels than their less-forfeited counterparts, their commitment was not due to their personal agency, which explains why diminutions in their sense of agency in the relationship did little to waver their commitment to the relationship. I was surprised, however, that scores on the imperialistic-self mode did not significantly correlate with agency or measures of relationship quality. The lack of association between the imperialistic-self mode and agency may reflect the fact that my measures of agency were relationship-specific; that is, they addressed personal agency specifically within the context of the relationship. Although highly imperialistic-self individuals may retain high personal

agency, they may not channel their feelings of agency into their relationships because they are personally disengaged from their relationships. Another possibility is perhaps highly imperialistic-self individuals may in actuality have low identity strength, but attempt “impose” their identities onto their relationships as a compensatory mechanism, much like how narcissists may seek affirmations or a sense of entitlement to mask what is actually a fragile sense of self-worth (Kernis, 2003). I will revisit these possibilities later in the dissertation.

### **Study 3**

Study 2 demonstrated that the link between identity modes and relationship quality is statistically mediated by feelings of personal agency in the relationship. These differences in personal agency, in turn, should influence how individuals respond to relationship challenges. Namely, highly fused-self individuals, who feel a strong sense of agency, may enact pro-relationship behaviors in the face of relationship threats. In contrast, highly forfeited-self individuals, who lack a sense of agency, may shy away from such challenges and passively internalize threats. Finally, highly imperialistic-self individuals, who disengage their personal selves and associated feelings of agency from the relationship, may refrain from enacting compensatory behaviors against threat. Thus, the goal of Study 3 was to replicate and extend the findings of Study 2 by directly examining links between identity merger modes and responses to relationship conflicts.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Two hundred fifty-seven participants (mean age = 31.06; S.D. = 10.78) who were currently in a romantic relationship participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Participants received \$0.30 for participation.

Mean relationship length was 5.77 years (S.D. = 7.12 years). The sample included 141 participants who were dating, 19 participants who were engaged, and 97 participants who were married. The final sample included 147 females (57.2%). Most (77.8%) were Caucasian.

## **Measures**

**Identity Merger Modes.** Participants completed the same measures as in Studies 1 and 2.

**Other Measures of Relational Bonds.** To demonstrate the unique predictive power of the measure of identity merger modes, participants also completed the same measures of self-other overlap (IOS; Aron et al., 1992) and attachment styles (AAQ; Simpson et al., 1992) as in Study 1.

**Relationship Agency.** I created a latent, relationship-agency term, by combining the two measures of relationship agency used in Study 1 (Relationship Power (Wang et al., 2006) and Relationship Autonomy (La Guardia et al., 2000)), plus a measure of Relationship Efficacy (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Relationship efficacy reflects the extent to which individuals are confident in their ability to overcome difficulties with their partner (e.g., "I am able to do the things needed to settle our conflicts.")

**Responses to Relationship Conflict.** To maximize the generalizability of my results, responses to relational conflicts and transgressions were measured using three different scales. First, participants completed the Responses to Dissatisfaction scale (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983),

which measures individuals' tendency toward accommodating behaviors in the face of relationship conflict. Participants indicated the degree to which they generally engage in each of four strategies: 1) Voice, or actively working to improve the relationship (e.g., I talk to him/her about what is going on); 2) Exit, or considering ending the relationship (e.g., I consider ending the relationship); and 3) Neglect, or passively allowing the relationship to deteriorate (e.g., I ignore the whole thing and try to spend less time with my partner). In general, voice is considered to be the most adaptive response to conflict. Accordingly, I created an overall assessment of accommodation by subtracting scores from maladaptive responses (exit and neglect) from the adaptive response (voice). Higher scores on accommodation therefore indicated more adaptive responses to conflict. Second, the Relationship Attributions Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) was used to assess the extent to which participants felt their partner should be held accountable or blamed for relational transgressions. Finally, participants completed a measure assessing their willingness to forgive their partners for transgressions (e.g., "I am quick to forgive my partner"; Fincham & Beach, 2002).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Replication of Discriminant and Convergent Validity**

Descriptive statistics for all scales can be found in Table 5 and correlations are provided in Table 6. Overall, the pattern of correlations between the measures of identity merger modes and other relationship variables replicated the results of Study 2. Again, all correlations between identity merger modes and other measures of relational bonds were modest, with none exceeding  $r = .27$ . As in Study 2, none of the identity merger modes significantly correlated with the IOS, and these correlations did not differ among the identity merger modes. Participants who scored

high on the fused-self mode reported greater secure attachment than their less-fused counterparts, while those who scored high on the forfeited-self mode reported greater insecure attachment than their less-forfeited counterparts.

Replicating Study 2, rate of endorsement of the fused-self mode was positively associated with measures of relationship agency, whereas rate of endorsement of both the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self mode was negatively associated with measures of relationship agency.

Although this finding differed from that of Study 2 in which the imperialistic-self mode was not significantly linked to relationship agency, the result was not surprising given that our measures of agency were relationship-specific.

### **Did Agency Mediate the Link Between Identity Merger Modes and Responses to Conflict?**

Having successfully replicated the discriminant and convergent validity of measures of identity merger modes, I next aimed to directly examine the links between merger modes and responses to relationship conflict. I again relied on structural equation modeling using Mplus 6.0 following the same methodology as Study 2. Fit indices are found in Table 8, and standardized parameters for all results are shown in Table 10.

**Accommodation.** As hypothesized, the fused-self mode was positively linked to accommodation while the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes were negatively linked to accommodation. Furthermore, agency fully mediated the link between the fused-self mode and accommodation, and between the forfeited-self mode and accommodation. That is, highly fused-self participants were more likely to actively improve their relationships during conflicts than their less-fused counterparts, and this link was accounted for by their high sense of personal agency. In contrast, highly forfeited-self participants were less likely to actively improve their

relationships during conflicts than their less-forfeited counterparts, and this link was accounted for by their lack of personal agency. The imperialistic-self mode was negatively linked to accommodation, but the link was not accounted for by agency.

**Blaming Attributions.** As I hypothesized, the fused-self mode was negatively linked to blame, and the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes were positively linked to blame. Furthermore, agency mediated the link between blame and the fused-self mode, the forfeited-self mode, and the imperialistic-self mode. That is, highly fused-self participants were less likely to blame their partners for transgressions than their less-fused counterparts, and this tendency was accounted for by their high sense of personal agency. In contrast, highly forfeited-self participants and imperialistic-self participants were more likely to blame their partners than their less-forfeited or less-imperialistic counterparts, and this tendency was accounted for by their lack of agency in the relationship.

**Forgiveness.** As I hypothesized, the fused-self mode was positively linked to forgiveness while the imperialistic-self mode was negatively linked to forgiveness. Furthermore, agency mediated the link between the fused-self mode and forgiveness and between the imperialistic-self mode and forgiveness. That is, highly fused-self participants were more likely to forgive their partners for transgressions than their less-fused counterparts, and this tendency was accounted for by their high sense of personal agency. In contrast, highly imperialistic-self participants were less likely to forgive their partners than their less-imperialistic counterparts, and this tendency was accounted for by their lack of agency. The forfeited-self mode was not significantly related to forgiveness.



Parameter	Total Effects		Direct Effects		Mediated Effects		Mediator Type
	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	
Accommodation							
Fused-Self	.33***	.07	.06	.06	.28***	.06	Partial
Forfeited-Self	-.17*	.07	.08	.06	-.25**	.06	Full
Imperialistic Self	-.14*	.05					None
Blame							
Fused-Self	-.15*	.07	.08	.06	-.23***	.05	Full
Forfeited-Self	.31***	.06	.11*	.06	.20***	.05	Partial
Imperialistic Self	.17**	.06	.08	.05	.09*	.04	Full
Forgiveness							
Fused-Self	.21**	.06	.04	.06	.17***	.04	Full
Forfeited-Self	-.08	.06					None
Imperialistic Self	-.22***	.06	-.16**	.05	-.06*	.03	Partial

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 10: Study 3 Tests of Statistical Mediation

In sum, the results replicated and extended the findings of Study 2. Consistent with expectation, highly fused-self participants relied on more constructive relationship maintenance strategies than their less-fused counterparts when confronted with relationship challenges. Furthermore, this association was mediated by feelings of agency; that is, highly fused-self participants experienced greater personal agency in their relationships than their less-fused counterparts, and such feelings allowed them to effectively mitigate threats to relationship well-being. In contrast, highly forfeited-self and imperialistic-self participants reported engaging in less constructive responses to relationship challenges than their less-forfeited or less-imperialistic counterparts. Highly forfeited-self participants were highly blaming of their partners, while highly imperialistic-self participants were both highly blaming and low on forgiveness. Within these groups, a *lack* of agency within the relationship was found to statistically mediate these effects.

#### **Study 4**

The results of the first three studies were generally consistent with my theoretical analysis of the nature of the identity merger modes; however the studies had three main methodological shortcomings. First, the participants were collected online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, restricting the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were all from the perspective of one individual rather than both members of a couple, making it difficult to assess the effects of different combinations of merger modes within relationships. Third, the data were all collected at a single time point, and provided no information about variations in the outcomes of interest over time. Fourth, the results were all based on correlational evidence preventing me from drawing conclusions about the direction of causality between the identity

merger modes and the outcomes of interest. Study 4 was designed to address the first three shortcomings by replicating the previous findings in a married sample, surveying both members of the relationship dyad, and tracking how identity merger modes predicted responses to relationship conflicts over the course of two weeks. I predicted that as relationship conflicts arise, highly fused-self participants may respond adaptively and maintain greater relationship satisfaction than their less-fused counterparts. In contrast, highly forfeited-self and imperialistic-self participants should tend to respond more maladaptively to conflicts and experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction.

Study 4 also explored the links between spouses' identity merger modes. Recall my earlier statement that the three modes of identity merger reflect people's *construals* of their relationships rather than objective characteristics of the relationships; both partners in a relationship may regard themselves to be in the forfeited-self mode; both may believe that they are in the imperialistic-self mode; one may believe that they are in the forfeited mode while the other believes that they are in the fused mode, and so on. As such, I predicted that the correlations between husbands' identity merger modes and wives' identity merger modes would be small. However, as couples' realities do tend to converge over time (Berger & Kellner, 1964), I expected small positive correlations between husbands' scores on the forfeited-self mode and wives' scores on the imperialistic-self mode, and conversely, husbands' scores on the imperialistic-self mode and wives' scores on the forfeited-self mode. I also expected a small positive correlation between husbands' and wives' scores on the fused-self mode.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Newlywed couples were recruited as part of a larger longitudinal study of marriage using several methods. First, advertisements were placed in community newspapers and with local wedding vendors (e.g., bridal shops, floral shops, etc.). Second, advertisements were placed on websites such as theknot.com and the social networking site *Facebook*. Third, premarital counselors were given fliers about the study to relay to potential participants. Couples responding to all methods of solicitation were screened in a telephone interview to determine whether they met the following criteria: (a) this was the first marriage for each partner, (b) the couple had been married less than 6 months, (c) neither partner had children, (d) each partner was at least 18 years of age (e) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), and (f) the couple had no immediate plans to move away from the area. The final sample consisted of 171 couples.

On average, husbands were 29.1 ( $SD = 5.3$ ) years old and had received 16.0 ( $SD = 2.3$ ) years of education. Seventy-seven percent were employed full-time and 14% were full-time students. Seventy-seven percent of husbands identified themselves as White, 15.8% as Hispanic/Latino, 1.8% as Asian American, and 2.3% as African American. Wives averaged 27.2 ( $SD = 4.9$ ) years old and had received 16.3 ( $SD = 1.9$ ) years of education. Sixty-eight percent were employed full-time and 13.5% were full-time students. Seventy-five percent of wives identified themselves as White, 15.2% as Hispanic/Latino, 2.3% as Asian American, and 3.5% as African American. About 50% of the sample was Christian. The median combined income of couples was \$60,000.

## **Procedure**

Couples were recruited as newlyweds. This study, however, relies on data collected one year after their initial recruitment (Time 3 wave). At Time 3, 158 couples were still married and participating in the study, 1 couple (0.6%) had divorced, 7 couples (4.1%) had separated, and 5 couples (2.9%) were married, but did not provide data due to time restrictions or relocation.

Couples were contacted and scheduled for an on campus laboratory session. Prior to this session, couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires that included self-report measures of marital satisfaction, commitment, perceptions of the partner, and various demographics, as well as a letter instructing couples to complete all questionnaires independently of one another. Couples were asked to bring these questionnaires with them to the lab session. As part of this session, couples were asked to complete another short battery of questionnaires, which included measures of identity merger modes, inclusion of other in the self, and forgiveness. Couples were paid \$75 for participating in this part of the study.

At the end of the lab session, couples were asked to participate in a 14-day daily diary task. Couples were given the choice of completing the diaries one of two ways. First, couples could choose to complete a paper version of the diary. In this case, each spouse was given all 14 diary questionnaires enclosed in pre-stamped envelopes. Couples were instructed to independently fill out one diary each night before going to bed, and to mail that diary the next morning. Couples could also choose to complete the diary online. Spouses were each given a website address and a unique identifier to log into the study website. Again, couples were instructed to independently complete one diary each night before going to bed. Couples were paid an additional \$30 for completing the diary task.

Overall, 141 couples (89.2%) participated in daily diary portion of the study. Couples participating in the dairy portion for the study did not differ from the rest of the sample on any of the outcome variables of interest. Of the 141 couples, 17.0% (24 couples) chose to complete paper diaries and 83.0% (117 couples) opted for the online diary. A total of 87.9% (124 couples) completed the diary all 14 days, and only 2.1% (3 couples) completed 7 or less days. Spouses completing the diary for all 14 days did not differ from spouses providing less data in the scores of their outcomes variables of interest. Whether spouses chose the paper diary or the online diary did not affect the amount of data spouses provided. Couples completing the online diary did not differ from those completing the paper diary in any outcome variable except for marital satisfaction among wives. Wives who completed the online diaries were generally more satisfied than those who completed the paper diaries,  $t(63.74) = 2.39, p = .020$ .

As data were examined through multilevel modeling techniques, spouses who did not provide data for all 14 days could be included in the analyses. Thus, the results reported are based on data from all 141 couples who completed the diary.

## **Measures**

### **Packet Measures**

To measure the identity merger modes, spouses completed a paper version of the same pictorial measures as in Studies 1 through 3. To measure relationship agency, spouses completed the same marital efficacy scale (Fincham et al., 2000) and relationship power scale (Wang et al., 2006) used in Study 3. To measure relationship quality, spouses completed the same satisfaction scale (Funk & Rogge, 2007) used in Studies 2 and 3, and a measure of relationship commitment using the first two items of the Personal Commitment Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Finally, to measure responses to relationship conflict, participants completed the same Responses to Dissatisfaction scale (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983), forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2002), and Relationship Attributions Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) as Study 3.

Analyses were conducted to determine whether spouses dropped out of the Time 3 data collection differed from spouses who did not on their Time 1 scores on the variables of interest. Results revealed that wives who completed the Time 3 data collection were significantly less blaming than those who did not,  $t(169) = 2.49, p = .014$ . No differences emerged for husbands.

### **Daily Diaries**

**Occurrence of Marital Conflicts.** To measure whether marital conflicts occurred, spouses reported whether or not they had a negative experience with their spouse that day. Specifically, spouses were asked whether “you had an argument with your spouse”, “spouse let you down or broke a promise”, “spouse criticized you”, “spouse withdrew from a conversation”, or “spouse showed anger or impatience toward you”. Spouses checked a box to indicate whether or not the event occurred within the last 24 hours. To create a cumulative score for marital conflicts, I dummy coded each response to indicate whether or not each response behavior occurred on a given day (1 = yes; 0 = no). I then added the variables from each day to create a cumulative score for marital conflicts with a potential range of 0 to 5. Higher scores, therefore, indicated more marital conflicts that day.

**Coping Responses.** Spouses were then assessed on how they responded to these stressors. Their responses were measured by asking if they engaged in one of three coping strategies. Spouses checked a box to indicate whether or not they used that strategy. The strategies were based off the Responses to Dissatisfaction scale (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983):

Voice (e.g., I talked to my partner and tried to work through the problem with him/her), Neglect (e.g., I sulked and voided talking to my spouse for awhile), and Exit (e.g., I began to think about ending the relationship). Spouses were also able to indicate that they did not experience any marital stressors that day. To create a cumulative score for coping responses, I dummy coded the coping responses to indicate whether or not each response behavior occurred on a given day (1 = yes; 0 = no). Again, I created an overall assessment of accommodation with a potential range of -1 to 2 by subtracting scores from maladaptive responses (exit and neglect) from the adaptive response (voice). Higher scores on accommodation therefore indicated more adaptive responses to conflict.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Spouses also completed a version of the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obioriah, Copeland, Meens, et al., 1986), which was modified for daily use. The items were “How satisfied were you with your partner today,” “How satisfied were you with your relationship with your partner today,” and “How satisfied were you with your marriage today?” The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all satisfied* and 7 = *extremely satisfied*).

**Control Variables.** Finally, spouses were asked how many hours they spent together each day as a control variable. Spouses also recorded which day of the week they completed the diary. The days were then recoded to indicate whether they fell on a weekday or a weekend (1 = weekend; 0 = weekday) to control for any weekend effects.



Variable	Husbands					Wives					T
	M	SD	Range		$\alpha$	M	SD	Range		$\alpha$	
			Potential	Actual				Potential	Actual		
Packet Measures											
Merger Modes											
Fused	5.6	1.1	1-7	2.0-7.0		5.6	1.3	1-7	1.0-7.0		.22
Forfeited	3.5	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0		2.8	1.5	1-7	1.0-7.0		3.21**
Imperialistic	3.1	1.7	1-7	1.0-6.0		3.8	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0		-3.85**
Measures of Agency											
Power	27.5	3.7	7-35	14-35	.62	28.5	3.7	7-35	18-35	.66	.316**
Marital Efficacy	20.0	5.3	7-35	7-28	.81	20.9	5.7	7-35	7-35	.88	2.00**
Conflict Responses											
Voice	20.9	4.3	3-27	9-27	.86	21.1	4.5	3-27	6-27	.85	.67
Exit	4.5	3.0	3-27	3-20	.92	4.9	3.6	3-27	3-24	.94	.94
Neglect	7.9	5.1	3-27	3-21	.93	7.3	5.1	3-27	3-25	.93	1.44
Blame	33.8	13.7	12-84	12-61	.93	34.3	13.5	12-84	12-67	.90	.23
Forgiveness	28.9	4.4	6-36	16-36	.73	26.1	5.9	6-36	7-36	.28	5.02***
Relationship Quality											
Satisfaction	94.4	13.4	16-111	41-111	.97	94.7	14.8	16-111	35-111	.97	-.75
Commitment	13.8	.72	2-14	10-14	.84	13.7	1.1	2-14	5-14	.87	.42
Diary Measures											
Daily Conflicts	.27	.80	0-5	0-5		.22	.72	0-5	0-5		
Daily Coping	.07	.29	-2-1	-2-1		.06	.29	-2-1	-2-1		
Daily Satisfaction	8.79	9.27	0-21	0-21	.96	8.91	9.47	0-21	0-21	.98	

Note: T refers to paired t-test results comparing the scores of husbands versus wives.  
 \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics for Study 4

## Results and Discussion

**Descriptive Statistics.** Table 11 shows the descriptive statistics for all the variables measured and Table 12 shows the correlations between my indices of identity merger modes and the IOS and measures of agency. Paired samples t-tests were used to compare spouses' scores on the identity merger modes, measures of agency, relationship quality, and responses to conflict (see Table 11). Husbands scored higher on the forfeited-self mode, and lower on the imperialistic-self mode, than wives. Furthermore, Husbands reported experiencing lower relationship power than their wives, and were more forgiving than their wives.

Replicating Studies 1-3, the fused-self mode was negatively correlated with the forfeited-self mode. It was also negatively correlated with the imperialistic-self mode, but the correlation did not reach significance. The forfeited-self mode was not significantly correlated with the imperialistic-self mode.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Fused-Self	-	.01	-.58***	.24**	.31***
2. Forfeited-Self	-.41***	-	-.15 <sup>†</sup>	-.21*	-.16 <sup>†</sup>
3. Imperialistic-Self	-.13	-.10	-	-.20	-.22**
4. Power	.34***	-.36***	.01	-	.57***
5. Marital Efficacy	.34***	-.40***	.09	.45***	-

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note:* Husbands' correlations are below the diagonal and Wives' correlations are above the diagonal.

Table 12: Study 4 Correlations between Identity Merger Modes and Agency Variables

The identity merger modes were not significantly correlated with any demographic variables, including age, gender, and length of relationship. As in the previous studies, the fused-self mode was positively linked to agency, which the forfeited-self mode was negatively linked

to agency. Overall, the imperialistic-self mode was not significantly linked to agency, except for highly imperialistic-self wives who reported lower feelings of marital efficacy than their less-imperialistic counterparts.

### Replication of Previous Studies

Having successfully replicated the discriminant and convergent validity of measures of identity merger modes, the next aim was to examine the links between merger modes and measures of relationship quality and responses to relationship conflict. I again relied on structural equation modeling using Mplus 6.0 following the same methodology as Studies 2 and 3. Because spouses are not independent of one another, analyses were conducted using the Actor Partner Independence mediation model (APIMeM). Fit indices are found in Table 13, and standardized parameters for results are shown in Tables 14-15.

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	AIC	CFI	RMSEA
Relationship Quality					
Satisfaction	54.99*	37	8806.60	.96	.06
Commitment	33.32	31	7242.60	.99	.02
Conflict Skills					
Accommodation	34.78	30	8666.58	.98	.03
Blame	36.01	31	8903.55	.98	.03
Forgiveness	36.47	31	8355.25	.98	.03

Table 13: Study 4 Goodness-of-Fit Indicators

Parameter	Total Effects		Direct Effects		Mediated Effects		Mediator Type
	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	
Satisfaction							
Fused-Self	.17*	.07	-.15	.10	.32**	.11	Full
Forfeited-Self	-.15*	.07	.23*	.10	-.38**	.12	Partial
Imperialistic Self	-.07	.06					None
Commitment							
Fused-Self	.20*	.10	-.06	.11	.25**	.10	Full
Forfeited-Self	.00	.10					None
Imperialistic Self	-.10	.08					None
Accommodation							
Fused-Self	.28**	.08	.05	.09	.30**	.10	Full
Forfeited-Self	.17+	.10					None
Imperialistic Self	-.05	.07					None
Blame							
Fused-Self	-.09	.09					None
Forfeited-Self	.11	.08					None
Imperialistic Self	.11	.08					None
Forgiveness							
Fused-Self	-.00	.09					None
Forfeited-Self	-.04	.09					None
Imperialistic Self	-.24**	.08					None

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 14: Study 4 Tests of Statistical Mediation for Husbands

Parameter	Total Effects		Direct Effects		Mediated Effects		Mediator Type
	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	Standardized parameter estimate	SE	
Satisfaction							
Fused-Self	.29**	.08	-.03	.09	.32***	.08	Full
Forfeited-Self	.17*	.07					None
Imperialistic Self	-.09	.07					None
Commitment							
Fused-Self	.18+	.09	.02	.10	.16**	.06	Full
Forfeited-Self	-.05	.08					None
Imperialistic Self	-.07	.09					None
Accommodation							
Fused-Self	.24**	.09	-.00	.10	.25***	.07	
Forfeited-Self	.15+	.08					None
Imperialistic Self	-.01	.09					None
Blame							
Fused-Self	-.13	.09					None
Forfeited-Self	-.17*	.08					None
Imperialistic Self	.10	.09					None
Forgiveness							
Fused-Self	.19*	.10					None
Forfeited-Self	.05	.08					None
Imperialistic Self	-.09	.09					None

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 15: Study 4 Tests of Statistical Mediation for Wives

**Global Satisfaction.** Replicating previous studies, scores on the fused-self mode were positively linked to relationship satisfaction for both husbands and wives. Furthermore, agency fully mediated those links. Scores on the forfeited-self mode, however, were negatively linked to global satisfaction for both husbands and wives. Agency partially mediated the link between forfeited-self mode and satisfaction for husbands, and did not mediate the link for wives. Replicating previous studies, the imperialistic-self mode was not significantly linked to global satisfaction.

**Commitment.** Replicating previous studies, scores on the fused-self mode were positively linked to commitment for both husbands and wives. Furthermore, agency fully mediated those links. Neither the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes were significantly linked to commitment.

**Accommodation.** Replicating previous studies, scores on the fused-self mode were positively linked to accommodation for both husbands and wives. Furthermore, agency fully mediated those links. Replicating previous studies, scores on the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes were negatively linked to accommodation for husbands. For wives, however, scores on the forfeited-self mode were positively linked to accommodation while no significant effect emerged for the imperialistic-self mode. This gender difference will be addressed shortly.

**Blaming Attributions.** As in previous studies, identity merger modes were not significantly linked to blame for husbands. Similar to the results for accommodation, scores on the forfeited-self mode were negatively linked to blaming attributions for wives, indicating that highly forfeited-self wives tended to display more adaptive behaviors. Wives' scores on the fused-self and imperialistic-self modes were not significantly linked to blaming attributions.

**Forgiveness.** For husbands, the fused-self mode was not significantly linked to forgiveness, but the imperialistic-self mode was negatively linked to forgiveness. For wives, the fused-self mode was positively linked to forgiveness, but the imperialistic-self mode was not significantly linked to forgiveness. Furthermore, agency mediated the link between the fused-self mode and forgiveness for wives. The forfeited-self mode was not significantly related to forgiveness for either husbands or wives.

### **Summary of Replication Analyses**

For the most part, the results replicated and extended the findings of Studies 2 and 3. Even more impressive is that the results were able to replicate during the couples' first year of marriage, a time that is largely considered the "honeymoon" phase when couples tend to experience uniformly high satisfaction and commitment. Consistent with expectation, highly fused-self participants relied on more constructive relationship maintenance strategies than their less-fused counterparts when confronted with relationship challenges. Furthermore, this association was mediated by feelings of agency; that is, highly fused individuals experienced greater personal agency in their relationships than their less-fused counterparts, and such feelings allowed them to effectively mitigate threats to relationship well-being. In contrast, highly forfeited-self and imperialistic-self participants reported engaging in less constructive responses to relationship challenges than their less-forfeited or less-imperialistic counterparts, and these links were not statistically mediated by agency.

Two main differences did emerge between this study and the two previous studies, however. The first is that those who scored high on the forfeited-self mode did not report greater commitment than their less-forfeited counterparts. This could be due to the fact that the current

sample is a newlywed sample; that is, the sample was already a more committed sample than the rest of the population in that they were already committed enough legally to join their lives.

The second and more surprising finding from the current study was that while highly forfeited-self husbands replicated previous studies by displaying more maladaptive responses to conflict predicted outcomes, highly forfeited-self wives responded *adaptively* to relationship conflicts. While gender did not moderate the link between the forfeited-self mode and accommodation in Study 3, the gender difference found in the current study is consistent with literature that suggests women are likelier than men to hold positive illusions of their partners and engage in pro-relationship behaviors regardless of the quality of their relationships (see Gagné & Lydon, 2003). Interestingly, McNulty (2008) proposed that generally “pro-relationship” responses such as forgiveness can be applied maladaptively, giving the spouses license to further transgress in the future. It could be that highly forfeited-self wives were actually inappropriately engaging in conflict responses that are otherwise generally considered adaptive. While teasing apart the appropriateness of each conflict response is beyond the scope of this dissertation, this issue can and should be addressed in future research.

### **Identity Merger Mode Combinations in Couples**

To explore the links between husbands’ identity merger modes with their wives’ identity merger modes, I correlated the husbands’ identity merger modes with the wives’ identity merger modes. As I predicted, a positive correlation emerged between husbands’ scores on forfeited-self mode and wives’ scores on imperialistic-self mode. Also, a positive correlation emerged between husbands’ scores on imperialistic-self mode and wives’ scores on forfeited-self mode. Finally, a positive correlation emerged between spouses’ scores on the fused-self mode.



Two correlations I did not expect to find was the tendency for highly fused-self wives to have less-forfeited husbands, or for highly fused-self husbands to have less-imperialistic wives. Recall from Table 12, however, that for husbands only, the fused-self mode was negatively correlated with the forfeited-self mode, and for wives only, the fused-self mode was negatively correlated with the forfeited-self mode. For husbands, therefore, less-forfeited means highly-fused, and for wives, less-imperialistic means highly-fused. Thus, these correlations confirm my notion that there should be a positive correlation between spouses' scores on the fused-self mode.

Variable	Husbands' Identity Merger Modes		
	Fused-Self	Forfeited-Self	Imperialistic-Self
Wives' Fused-Self	.24**	-.29***	.07
Wives' Forfeited-Self	.02	-.14 <sup>†</sup>	.20*
Wives' Imperialistic-Self	-.21*	.30***	-.07

Table 16: Correlations between Spouses' Identity Merger Modes

Despite being in the predicted directions, the correlations were modest, suggesting that identity merger modes referred to people's construals of their relationships rather than objective characteristics of the relationship. That is, if a wife scored high on the forfeited-self mode, the score indicated that her relational identity was drawn more from her partner than herself, and not that her partner was actively imperializing the formation of the relational identity. Whereas earlier findings seemed to suggest that the identity merger modes were relationship-specific, and perhaps based on the unique partner dynamics of each relationship, the finding that identity merger modes were also self-construals suggest that perhaps identity merger modes may have risen from personal experiences going into the relationship

## Daily Diaries

Turning to the analysis of the daily diary data, I predicted that on days of greater marital conflict, highly fused-self spouses would report engaging in more positive conflict coping strategies and higher levels of daily marital satisfaction than their less-fused counterparts. Conversely, on days of greater marital conflict, highly forfeited-self spouses would report engaging in fewer positive coping responses and lower levels of daily marital satisfaction than their less-forfeited counterparts. Similarly, highly imperialistic-self spouses also would report fewer positive coping responses and lower daily satisfaction on high conflict days than their less-imperialistic counterparts.

To address both the within-subject and between-subjects hypotheses, data were examined using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM; Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994). This approach was adopted for several reasons. First, in contrast to other approaches to analyzing multilevel models (e.g., structural equation modeling), HLM provides reliable estimates of within-subject parameters even when sample sizes are relatively small. Second, HLM provides maximally efficient estimates of these parameters by weighting individual estimates according to empirical Bayes theory. When the within-subject parameter for an individual can be estimated precisely, the final estimate relies heavily on the individual data. When the parameter cannot be estimated precisely (e.g., because of missing data), the final estimate relies more heavily on the mean of the sample. Because the most precise estimates therefore contribute more to the final estimated variance of the sample, variances estimated in this way tend to be more conservative than those obtained through traditional OLS methods.

To account for statistical interdependence within couples, I followed procedures described by Laurenceau and Bolger (2005), which are based on recommendations by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995). Specifically, husbands' and wives' effects were estimated simultaneously for all analyses and dummy variables were used to nest husband and wife data within each couple. This approach allows for straightforward tests of gender differences in coefficients of interest (a 1-*df*  $\chi^2$  test).

The within-person association between changes in daily marital conflict and changes in daily satisfaction and daily coping responses over the 2-week period was examined with the following HLM equation, where time and conflict were centered within-persons for each spouse.

$$\begin{aligned}
 y_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} (\text{husbands}) + \beta_{1j} (\text{wives}) + \beta_{2j} (\text{husbands' time}) \\
 & + \beta_{3j} (\text{wives' time}) + \beta_{4j} (\text{husbands' daily conflict}) \\
 & + \beta_{5j} (\text{wives' s daily conflict}) + r_{ij}
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{1}$$

Centering conflict in this way allowed for the examination of whether being high or low in daily marital conflict relative to the individual's own mean rating was associated with changes in daily marital satisfaction or coping responses. In this equation,  $\beta_0$  and  $\beta_1$  represent an estimate of the average score for each outcome variable over the 2-week period for a given spouse.  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_3$  capture the slope of the outcome variable over time.  $\beta_4$  and  $\beta_5$  capture the within-person association between the score on the outcome variable for each spouse and level of daily conflict, controlling for the spouse's average score on the outcome variable and any linear changes in the outcome variables over time. I also centered the time spent together and dummy coded whether the diary was completed on a weekday versus a weekend for each spouse and added it to the

model as control variables. I then eliminated those variables if they were not significantly linked to the outcome variable of interest.

As shown in Table 17, spouses' satisfaction levels and coping response tendencies did not exhibit any linear change over the 14 day period. The only exception was that wives' positive coping responses marginally decreased over the 14 day period. The test of gender differences in the effect of time on coping responses was not significant, however,  $\chi^2(1) = .17, ns$ . Moreover, results revealed that on days of greater marital conflict, spouses on average reported lower feelings of marital satisfaction and reported engaging in a greater number of positive coping responses.

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Global Satisfaction			
Husbands ( <i>df</i> = 134)			
Intercept	17.87	.24	73.06***
Slope	-.02	.01	-1.31
Marital Conflict	-1.10	.09	-12.80***
Wives ( <i>df</i> = 134)			
Intercept	17.92	.31	57.75***
Slope	-.03	.02	-1.57
Marital Conflict	-1.20	.10	-11.68***
Coping Responses			
Husbands ( <i>df</i> = 134)			
Intercept	.16	.02	6.12***
Slope	-.00	.00	-1.08
Marital Conflict	.02	.01	1.75†
Wives ( <i>df</i> = 134)			
Intercept	.11	.02	6.44***
Slope	-.00	.00	-1.69†
Marital Conflict	.07	.02	3.44**

Table 17: Effects of Marital Conflicts on Relationship Satisfaction and Coping Responses

To examine whether between-person differences in identity merger mode scores moderated these effects, I entered the spouses' fused-self, forfeited-self, and imperialistic-self scores at the between-subjects level of the HLM analysis, according to the following equations. All identity merger modes were centered on the sample mean. Thus, Equations 1, 2a, and 2b were estimated in a single model.

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{5j} = & \gamma_{50} + \gamma_{51} (\text{husbands' fused-self mode}) \\ & + \gamma_{52} (\text{husbands' forfeited-self mode}) \\ & + \gamma_{53} (\text{husbands' imperialistic-self mode}) + \mu_{5j} \end{aligned} \quad (2a)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \beta_{6j} = & \gamma_{60} + \gamma_{61} (\text{wives' fused-self mode}) \\ & + \gamma_{62} (\text{wives' forfeited-self mode}) \\ & + \gamma_{63} (\text{wives' imperialistic-self mode}) + \mu_{6j} \end{aligned} \quad (2c)$$

As shown in Table 18, there was a significant effect of the fused-self mode on the link between daily conflict and daily satisfaction for husbands, such that on high-conflict days, highly fused-self husbands were more likely than less-fused husbands to report a decrease in marital satisfaction. A test of the gender difference on this effect was not significant  $\chi^2(1) = .85, ns$ . No other significant effects emerged.

### **Summary of Diary Study**

For the most part, the identity merger modes did not interact with marital conflicts to predict changes in satisfaction or coping responses. This may be due to the low occurrence of daily marital conflicts during the 14 day period ( $M_{\text{Hus}} = .27$  and  $M_{\text{Wife}} = .22$ ). The only significant finding was that highly fused-self husbands were more likely than less-fused husbands to report a decrease in marital satisfaction. Although this finding was contrary to my predictions, it is in line

with evidence from fusion research that fused individuals do experience negative feelings after feeling wronged by their group, yet they continue to respond with pro-group behaviors (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vásquez, & Swann, 2011). Likewise, it could be that highly fused-self husbands temporarily experience less happiness with their relationship on days they experience relationship conflicts, yet they still are able to engage in compensatory reactions that allow them to preserve their overall relationship satisfaction over time.

Variable	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>r</i>
<b>Global Satisfaction</b>				
Husbands ( <i>df</i> = 131)				
Fused-Self	-.14	.06	-2.46*	
Forfeited-Self	-.02	.04	-.46	
Imperialistic-Self	-.05	.05	-.99	
Wives ( <i>df</i> = 131)				
Fused-Self	-.02	.11	-.19	
Forfeited-Self	.04	.06	.65	
Imperialistic-Self	-.08	.07	-1.1	
<b>Coping Responses</b>				
Husbands ( <i>df</i> = 131)				
Fused-Self	-.01	.01	-.93	
Forfeited-Self	.01	.01	1.03	
Imperialistic-Self	-.01	.01	-.82	
Wives ( <i>df</i> = 131)				
Fused-Self	-.00	.02	-.21	
Forfeited-Self	.01	.01	.88	
Imperialistic-Self	-.02	.01	-1.12	

Table 18: Identity Merger Modes as Moderators of Stress Effects on Satisfaction and Coping

### Study 5

The first four studies were all based on correlational evidence, preventing me from drawing conclusions about the causal direction between the identity merger modes and responses to relationship difficulties. For example, the association between sacrificing for one's partner and

identity merger modes could reflect a tendency for sacrificing to cause people to endorse different identity merger modes rather than the other way around.

To address this ambiguity, Study 5 was an experimental study designed to examine willingness of participants to sacrifice for their partner in the wake of threats to either the relationship or the partner. The results of the previous studies indicated that fused-self participants uniquely experienced high personal agency directed toward the relationship that motivated pro-relationship behaviors such as forgiving the partner's transgressions and actively working to improve the relationship. These data suggested that a threat to the relationship would trigger compensatory activities among highly fused-self participants but not among highly forfeited-self or imperialistic-self participants. Furthermore, to the extent that such compensatory activity is designed to protect the relational self rather than the partner per se, threats to the relationship, but not the partner, should amplify compensatory activity. To test this hypothesis, I examined the impact of a threat to the relationship versus a threat to the partner on the inclination to sacrifice for one's romantic partners.

I also investigated the effects of threat to the relationship and the partner on personal self-views (e.g., self-esteem). Noting that highly fused-self participants retain a potent sense of personal self despite their close alignment with the partner, I expected that their self-esteem would be resilient in the face of threats to the relationship and partner. Similarly, because highly imperialistic-self participants fail to fully engage themselves in the relationship, they may retain a potent sense of personal self that enables their self-esteem to emerge unscathed from threats to the relationship. In contrast, because highly forfeited-self participants tether their feelings of

personal agency to the relationship, they may internalize threats to the relationship (but not the partner) and lower their self-esteem accordingly.

In short, in this experiment, participants encountered either a threat to the relationship, a threat to the partner, or no threat at all. I hypothesized that the relationship threat – but not the partner threat or control – would result in an increase in inclination to sacrifice for the partner among highly fused-self participants only, as well as a decrease in self-esteem among highly forfeited-self participants only.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

One hundred sixty-six participants (mean age = 28.44; S.D. = 10.22) were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Workers were paid \$0.25 for their participation.

Participation was restricted only to those who reported currently being in a romantic relationship. Mean relationship length was 3.45 years (S.D. = 4.69 years). The sample included 124 participants who were dating, 19 participants who were engaged, 22 participants in married relationships, and 1 unknown. The final sample included 109 females (65.7%). Most (74.1%) were Caucasian.

### **Procedure**

Participants completed the same pictorial measures of identity merger modes used in the first three studies, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). They also completed the same IOS (Aron et al., 1992) and AAQ (Simpson et al., 1992) used in the previous studies. They then completed “filler” items rating themselves and their partners using the Ten-Item



Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003) and the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989). These items were added to increase the credibility of the false feedback delivered to participants in the study.

After completing the initial questionnaires, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: control, relationship threat, and partner threat. Control participants did not receive feedback about their relationships or their partners, but were asked to rate both their compatibility with their partner and their partners' general abilities and talents on a scale of 0 to 100.

In the relationship threat condition, participants received the following feedback: Our research team has come up with a compatibility algorithm based on the previous research we have done. This algorithm is similar to, but improves upon the algorithms used in eHarmony and other related dating sites. We have entered your responses into the algorithm, and we found that you and your partner have a compatibility rating of 37% on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. So far, the average compatibility of partners we have tested is 78%.

What does the score mean?

Couples low in compatibility find it relatively difficult to communicate and interact with one another. While research shows that it is possible for incompatible couples to have successful relationships, the process through which that occurs is often rocky and difficult. Low compatible couples tend to

experience lower levels of relationship satisfaction, and this can impact their personal lives outside of the relationship. Couples high in compatibility find it relatively easy to communicate and interact with one another. Highly compatible couples share similar traits and values, leading their relationship to enhance their personal lives.

After receiving the feedback, relationship threat participants were asked to rate their relationship compatibility as a manipulation check.

In the partner threat condition, participants received the following feedback:

Our research team has come up with an algorithm that measures general ability and talents based on the previous research we have done. We have entered your responses into the algorithm, and we found your partner rated a 37% in general ability and talents on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. So far, the average rating of partners in our study is 78%.

What does the score mean?

Those who score low on general abilities and talents sometimes feel ineffective at tasks and unconfident when confronting challenges. These self-views can negatively impact actual outcomes of the long-term goals individuals engage in. While research shows it is possible for low scoring individuals to succeed, the process through which that occurs is often rocky and difficult. Those who score high in general abilities and talents feel extremely effective at tasks and confront

challenges with complete confidence. They can accomplish goals with relative ease.

After receiving the feedback, partner threat participants were asked to rate their partners' general abilities and talents as a manipulation check.

All participants then completed two items from the Satisfaction with Sacrifice Scale (Stanley & Markman, 2001). The items were "It can be personally fulfilling to give up something for my partner" and "I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself." Thus, these items tap a general inclination to sacrifice for a partner. Participants also completed a measure of self-liking (SLCS, Tafarodi & Swann).

Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed about the true purpose of the study, and told that the feedback was pre-written and randomly assigned, and that the feedback was not based on any information we received from them about their relationship. Participants were also given an opportunity to withdraw their data from the study without penalty. None of the participants withdrew their information from the study.

### **Manipulation Check**

As a manipulation check, I first performed an independent t-test comparing relationship compatibility and partner ratings across conditions. Those in the relationship threat condition ( $M = 75.3$ ,  $SD = 18.3$ ) rated their relationship as less compatible than the control group ( $M = 84.8$ ,  $SD = 16.1$ ),  $t(107) = -2.872$ ,  $p < .01$ . Furthermore, those in the partner threat condition ( $M = 73.4$ ,  $SD = 16.4$ ) rated their partner's general abilities and talents as significantly lower than those in the control condition ( $M = 84.3$ ,  $SD = 12.3$ ),  $t(105) = -3.85$ ,  $p < .01$ .

## Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 5 can be found in Table 19, while Table 20 presents the correlations among the predictor variables. To test whether the identity merger modes moderated the effect of threat on each of our outcome measures, three separate stepwise regressions were conducted for each mode. Conditions were effect-coded (-1, 0, 1) and centered each of the predictor variables. I then controlled for demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, race, relationship length) by entering them on the first step, and controlled for other measures of relational bonds (IOS and attachment styles) by entering them on the second step. I tested main effects of the identity merger modes and threat conditions by entering them on the third step, and their interaction on the fourth step. Backwards elimination was used to eliminate unnecessary variables from the final model.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		$\alpha$
			Potential	Actual	
Identity Merger Modes					
Fused-Self	5.4	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Forfeited-Self	3.2	1.9	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Imperialistic-Self	3.4	1.9	1-7	1.0-7.0	
Related Relationship Constructs					
Avoidant Attachment	3.7	1.1	1-7	1.0-6.3	.86
Anxious Attachment	3.5	1.0	1-7	1.0-6.7	.79
T1 Self-Esteem (RSE)	5.1	1.2	1-7	2.0-7.0	.92
Outcomes					
Inclination to Sacrifice	5.2	1.2	1-7	1.5-7.0	.81
T2 Self-Liking (SLCS)	3.4	1.0	1-5	1.1-5.0	.94
Satisfaction	85.96	20.7	0-112	27.0-111.0	.98

Table 19: Descriptive Statistics for Study 5

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Fused-Self	-					
2. Forfeited-Self	-.42**	-				
3. Imperialistic-Self	-.21**	-.02	-			
4. Anxious	-.14+	.17*	.05	-		
5. Avoidant	-.20*	.03	-.01	.28**	-	
6. Self-Esteem	.21**	-.20**	-.00	-.45**	-.30**	-

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 20: Study 5 Correlations between Identity Merger Modes and Time 1 Variables

### Inclination to Sacrifice

There was a significant interaction between the fused-self mode and the relationship threat condition ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .05$ ) in that higher scores in the fused-self mode predicted a greater inclination to sacrifice in the relationship threat condition ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not in the partner ( $\beta = -.07$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $ns$ ) or control conditions ( $\beta = .03$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $ns$ ) (see Figure 1). This finding replicates previous evidence indicating that an identity challenge selectively increases the propensity of fused people to endorse sacrificing themselves for their group (Gomez, Morales, et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). Neither the forfeited-self nor imperialistic-self modes significantly interacted with either threat condition ( $\beta$ 's  $< .06$ ,  $ns$ ).

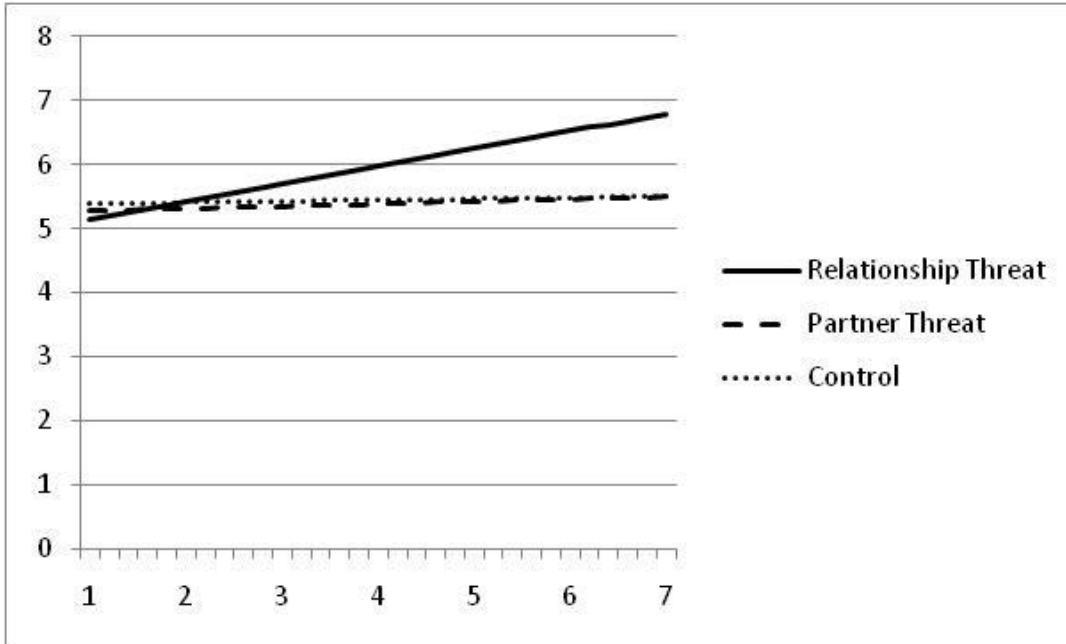


Figure 1: The effect of the fused-self mode on inclination to sacrifice across conditions.

The interaction qualified a marginally significant main effect such that highly fused-self participants were especially inclined to sacrifice for their partner ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and a marginally significant main effect of relationship threat ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .07$ ) in that those in the relationship threat condition tended to be less inclined to sacrifice. There were no main effects of partner threat ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $ns$ ). No significant effects were found for the forfeited-self and imperialistic-self modes ( $\beta$ 's  $< -.03$ ,  $ns$ ).

In sum, the results showed that highly fused-self participants uniquely engaged in compensatory behaviors in the face of relationship threats. That is, when encountering negative feedback about their relationship, they increased their inclination to sacrifice for their partners.

### Self-Esteem

There was a significant interaction between the forfeited-self mode and the relationship threat condition ( $\beta = -.07$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Higher scores in the forfeited-self mode marginally

predicted lower self-esteem in the relationship threat condition ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .08$ ) but not the partner threat ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $ns$ ) or control conditions ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $ns$ ) (see Figure 2). For all analyses I controlled for pre-manipulation self-esteem. These results suggest that the personal identities of highly forfeited-self individuals were so wrapped up in the relationship that threats to the relationship were particularly devastating to their personal identities. Consequently, these individuals may internalize negative external feedback about their relationships, lowering their sense of self-esteem. Neither the fused-self nor imperialistic-self modes significantly interacted with either threat condition ( $\beta$ 's  $< .01$ ,  $ns$ ), suggesting that highly forfeited-self participants were the only ones for whom threats to the relationship threatened the self. The self-esteem of those that scored high on the fused-self mode or imperialistic-self mode remained unaffected by the threat manipulations. Furthermore, there were no significant main effects of the identity merger modes or condition on self-liking ( $\beta$ 's  $< -.03$ ,  $ns$ ).

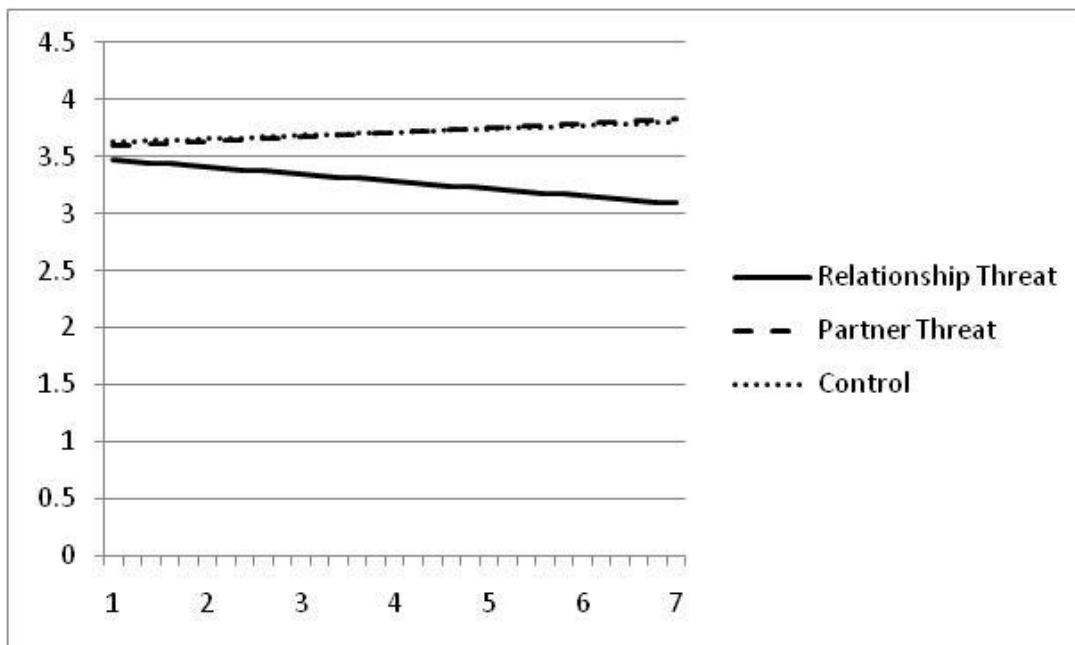


Figure 2: The effect of the forfeited-self mode on self-esteem across conditions.

It is notable that merger mode did not moderate the impact of partner threat on my outcomes measures. This finding supports my assumption that the identity merger modes reflect the direction of influence between the personal and relational selves instead of between the self and the partner. That is, those who strongly endorsed the imperialistic-self mode experienced unidirectional influence from the personal to the relational self, rather than from the self to the partner, and so forth.

### **Study 6**

The five previous studies demonstrated that identity merger modes can influence relationship satisfaction and commitment beyond the effects of other measures of relational bonds. Furthermore, they demonstrated that how people overlap with their partners influences their ability to remain agentic within their relationships, and thus their propensity to engage in compensatory behaviors against relationship conflicts and threats. The next two studies focused on the nature of the identity merger modes. Recall my assumptions that identity merger modes differ in the prominence of the personal versus partner identities in forming the relational self. Specifically, in the fused-self mode, the personal and partner identities are equally prominent in the relational self; in the forfeited-self mode, the partner identity is disproportionately prominent in the relational self; and in the imperialistic-self mode, the personal self is disproportionately prominent in the relational self. Thus, Study 6 tested these assumptions by examining how people's construals of themselves and their partners differ among the identity merger modes.

Previous research has demonstrated that people are more adept at recognizing highly self-descriptive traits than those that are only moderately self-descriptive. For example, Markus (1977) found that people recognized highly self-descriptive traits more quickly than traits that



were less self-descriptive. Kuiper (1981) found similar effects: in his study, people recognized highly self-descriptive adjectives faster than they recognized moderately self-descriptive adjectives.

People's ability to recognize self-descriptive traits can be compromised when these traits are shared with general others, however. This is because individuals must engage in additional cognitive steps to determine whether those traits are unique to the self (Mueller, Ross, & Heesacker, 1984; Mueller, Thompson, & Dugan, 1986). In line with this reasoning, Aron and colleagues (1991) proposed that because the cognitive structure of the self greatly overlaps with those of close others, distinguishing traits that are descriptive of self but not the close other would take longer to do, and also create confusion. Indeed, Aron and colleagues found that participants were slower in responding to traits that differed between self and their spouse than traits that differed between the self and an entertainment personality, regardless of whether those traits were self-descriptive. Furthermore, participants were less accurate in recognizing traits that differed between the self and their spouse than traits that differed between the self and an entertainment personality. These findings lent support to the idea that overlap of cognitive structures increased as couples grew closer.

The identity merger mode formulation argues that directionality of influence affects the salience of the personal self within the relational self, regardless of the degree of self-other overlap. That is, what happens to the personal self in the self-other merger can affect the cognitive salience of traits specific to the personal self versus the relational self. Salience of the personal self does not factor into the self-expansion theory; thus in Aron et al.'s (1991) study, self-descriptiveness of the trait did not predict latency or accuracy. Rather, the effect was driven

by whether the traits were different between the self and partner. In contrast, I argue that because the identity merger modes differ in the salience of the personal self within the relationship, the self-descriptiveness of the traits may predict faster and more accurate responses, but only for modes in which the personal self remains salient (fused-self and imperialistic-self individuals). Furthermore, confusion of self and other may only exist when both the personal and the relational selves remain salient (fused-self individuals). Confusion of the self and other may not occur for those whose personal selves are not salient (forfeited-self individuals) and for those whose relational selves are not salient (imperialistic-self individuals).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Fifty-one undergraduates (mean age = 19.98; S.D. = 3.25) who were currently in romantic relationships from the University of Texas participated in this study. Participants were given partial class credit for their participation.

Mean relationship length was 1.81 years (S.D. = 2.58 years). The sample included 50 participants who were dating, 2 participants who were engaged, and 2 participants who were married. The final sample included 40 females (73.6%). About half (58.5%) were Caucasian.

### **Procedure**

Participants were brought in individually, completed the same identity merger mode scales as the previous studies before rating themselves, their partners, and Ellen DeGeneres, a well-known entertainment celebrity on a series of 90 trait adjectives (Aron et al., 1991; Anderson, 1968) using a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *Extremely like*, and 7 = *Extremely unlike*). The traits were randomly ordered for each participant. Twenty of the traits had likableness ratings

above 4.5, 30 of the traits have likableness ratings between 2.0 and 3.8, and 30 of the traits had likableness ratings between 1.7. Using the IOS (Aron et al., 1992), participants also rated the closeness between themselves and (a) their partner, and (b) the celebrity.

Participants then completed a reaction time task. Ten example adjectives were given (e.g., female, male, student, faculty) to familiarize the participants with the task. The series of 90 traits were then presented three times, with the traits in a different random order each time. Participants were told to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible whether each trait describes them by pressing the “E” key to indicate “me”, and the “I” key to indicate “not me.” The computer recorded participant responses and latencies using Direct RT v2010. Descriptive statistics are found in Table 21.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
			Potential	Actual
Identity Merger Modes				
Fused-Self	5.7	1.2	1-7	2.0-7.0
Forfeited-Self	3.2	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0
Imperialistic-Self	3.9	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0
Inclusion of Other in the Self				
Romantic Partner	4.9	1.2	1-7	1.0-7.0
Ellen Degeneres	3.5	1.0	1-7	1.0-6.7
Reaction Times (ms)				
Self Traits	1056.44	252.75		585.3-1607.3
Neutral Traits	1047.94	290.85		582.8-2229.0
Shared Traits	1081.24	256.31		603.6-1738.0
Different Traits	1046.47	248.21		616.4-1877.4
Accuracy				
Self Traits	.76	.18	0-1	.33-1.0
Neutral Traits	.80	.21	0-1	.00-1.0
Shared Traits	.77	.21	0-1	.33-1.0
Different Traits	.80	.16	0-1	.39-1.0

Table 21: Descriptive Statistics for Study 6

## **Manipulation Check**

As a manipulation check, I performed a paired sample t-test comparing the partner IOS score with the celebrity IOS score. As expected, participants reported being significantly closer to their partner than to the celebrity,  $t(52) = 20.84, p = .000$ .

## **Statistical analyses**

### **Trait Ratings**

Using the methods outlined in Smith and Henry (1996), trait ratings for descriptiveness for each target (self, partner, celebrity) were trichotomized using the 7-point scale: 1-3 = true, 4 = neutral, 5-7 = false. From these trichotomized scores, the traits were divided into groups according to their descriptiveness for each target: a) traits that were true of self and partner but false for the celebrity (TTF), b) traits that were true of self, false of partner, and true of the celebrity (TFT), c) traits that were false of self and partner, but true of the celebrity (FFT), and d) traits that were false of self, true of partner, and false of the celebrity (FTF). Because the celebrity scores serve as a control (to ensure that the similarity/difference between the self and partner was not due to similarity/differences between the self and generalized others), the other four combinations (i.e., TTT, FFF, TFF, FTT) were not of interest and not used in this study.

### **Reaction Time Task**

Only analyzed data with reaction times between 300 ms and 5000 ms were analyzed, as reaction times outside of this range were most likely due to error (Ratcliff, 1993). One participant had a high percentage of reaction times that fell outside of the 300 ms to 5000 ms range (13%). Consequently, this participant was treated as an outlier and was not include the participant in the analyses. Average response latencies and accuracy scores were computed

across the three trials for each trait. The average response latencies and accuracy scores for each trait were further averaged to compute a score for each trait group (i.e., TTF, TFT, FFT, and FTF). Finally, I composited the trait groups to form two pairs of outcomes: True (TTF and TFT) vs. False (FFT and FTF), and Same (TTF, FFT) vs. Different (TFT, FTF). I then conducted a repeated-measure ANCOVA for each pair of outcomes for both response latencies and accuracy. I controlled for scores on the IOS to account for the variance explained by degree of self-other overlap, and also controlled for which hand participants tend to write with to account for the variance explained by differences in dominant hands.

### **Results and Discussion**

As stated earlier, I expected highly fused-self participants to be more accurate and faster at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits, and traits that were similar between the self and partner than traits that differed, than their less-fused counterparts. The results partially supported my hypotheses. As predicted, highly fused-self participants were faster than their less-fused counterparts at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits,  $F(1,39) = 5.43, p = .025$ , and they were also faster at recognizing traits that were similar between the self and partner than traits that different,  $F(1,38) = 5.45, p = .025$ . Highly fused-self participants were not significantly more accurate than their less-fused counterparts, however, at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits,  $F(1,40) = 2.26, p = .143$ , or shared traits versus different traits,  $F(1,37) = 2.42, p = .129$ , although the trends were in the predicted direction. This could be due to limited variability of the accuracy scores. In sum, results suggested that both the personal and partner selves were highly salient among those who scored high on the fused-self mode.

I expected no difference in latency and accuracy for the highly forfeited-self participants for self-descriptive versus neutral traits because their personal self should not remain salient. However, I did expect highly forfeited-self participants to be faster and more accurate at recognizing traits that were shared between the partner versus different, as their partner's self should be especially salient in their own self-concepts. As predicted, highly forfeited-self participants were not faster,  $F(1,39) = .02, p = .891$ , or more accurate,  $F(1,40) = 1.52, p = .224$ , at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits than their less-forfeited counterparts. They were, however, marginally faster than their less-forfeited counterparts at recognizing shared versus different traits,  $F(1,38) = 2.994, p = .092$ . Contrary to predictions, forfeited-self participants were not more accurate at predicting shared versus different traits,  $F(1,37) = .652, p = .425$ . Again, this could be due to limited variability of the accuracy scores. In sum, results suggested that the partner self, but not the personal self was salient among those who scored high on the forfeited-self mode.

Finally, I expected the highly imperialistic-self participants to be more accurate and faster at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits than their less-imperialistic counterparts, but to demonstrate no difference in accuracy and latency for traits that differed versus those that were shared. Contrary to these predictions, highly imperialistic-self participants were not faster,  $F(1,39) = .81, p = .370$ , or more accurate,  $F(1,40) = .552, p = .462$ , than their less-imperialistic counterparts at recognizing self-descriptive versus neutral traits. This finding may be related to the evidence from the previous studies that highly imperialistic-self participants reported experiencing lower agentic in their relationships than their less-imperialistic counterparts. As stated earlier in this dissertation, highly imperialistic-self individuals may not have a very strong

sense of self despite their tendency to impose their personal identities onto their partners or relationships. Analogous to narcissists, who seek constant affirmations and a high sense of entitlement to compensate for their “fragile” sense of self-esteem (Kernis, 2003), highly imperialistic-self individuals may attempt to shape the identity of their relationships to compensate for their “weak” sense of self and identity. This possibility is an empirical question that should be tested in future studies. As expected, imperialistic-self participants were not faster,  $F(1,39) = .810, p = .374$ , or more accurate,  $F(1,37) = .517, p = .476$ , at recognizing traits that differed versus traits that were shared.

### **Study 7**

Whereas Study 6 demonstrated the prominence of the personal verses partner identities in the relational self, Study 7 aimed to investigate behavioral evidence of influence between relationship partners in relation to the identity merger modes<sup>4</sup>. Specifically, Study 7 examined the word usage during conflict interactions to determine relationship partners’ social engagement and influence on one another.

#### **Linguistic Style Matching**

Social psychological researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that people naturally synchronize their verbal and nonverbal behaviors during interactions with one another. People mimic one another’s postures (La France, 1985), breathing patterns (McFarland, 2001), even manner of speaking (Melzer, Morris, & Hayes, 1971; Natale, 1975; Shepard, Giles, & LePoire,

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<sup>4</sup> While the usage of “we” and “I” words can be used as behavioral evidence of a shared identity (i.e., the use of “I” decreases and the use of “we” increases as shared identity increases; Pennebaker, 2011), I predicted that the use of these pronouns would not significantly covary with the identity merger modes as the merger modes were not linked to scores on inclusion of other in the self or interdependence. Indeed that is what I found: “I” usage and “we” usage were not significantly linked to any of the identity merger modes,  $\beta$ 's < .15,  $p$ 's > .13.

2001). This phenomenon is heightened among romantic dyads; in fact over time, couples' facial features tend to look more similar due to the synchrony of expressions (Zajonc, Adelman, Murphy, & Niedenthal, 1987). Importantly, mimicry is largely an unconscious process (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009), and has been linked to a desire to increase affiliation (Ybarra, Johnstone, Miles, & Peace, 2006; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008) and liking (Karremans & Verwijmeren, 2008).

Pennebaker and colleagues (Gonzales, Hancock, & Pennebaker, 2010; Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010) found that synchrony in dyads extended to speaking or writing styles, phenomenon called *language style matching* (LSM). That is, people tend to converge in their use of function words, or stylistic words that do not convey information on their own (e.g., pronouns, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs) (see Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). Like nonverbal mimicry, LSM has been shown to reflect an individual's interest in and desire to understand their partners (Ireland, Slatcher, Eastwick, Scissors, Finkel, & Pennebaker, 2011).

LSM is useful in studying direction of influence for two reasons. Ireland and Pennebaker (2010) found that LSM was largely undetectable to observers, and participants were able to consciously increase matching of the content of their language, but not in the style with which they communicated. Thus, LSM is a largely uncontrollable process, making it a highly ecologically valid measure that is not constrained by artificial laboratory settings. Second, LSM is a direct measure of how much each individual matches – or is influenced by – his or her interaction partner. Thus far, the studies in this proposal have relied on participants' self-reports of the direction of influence between the self and partner to form the relational self. LSM allows me to assess a quantifiable, behavioral indicator of influence between dyads that has shown to



predict relationship stability beyond traditional self-reports of relationship quality (Ireland et al., 2011). In short, Study 7 explored the link between self-reported direction of influence (that is, the identity merger modes) with behavioral evidence of influence in relationships.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Data were collected from the same sample of participants described in Study 4. As stated earlier, couples were recruited as newlyweds as part of a larger study. On average, husbands were 29.1 ( $SD = 5.3$ ) years old and had received 16.0 ( $SD = 2.3$ ) years of education. Seventy-seven percent were employed full-time and 14% were full-time students. Seventy-seven percent of husbands identified themselves as White, 15.8% as Hispanic/Latino, 1.8% as Asian American, and 2.3% as African American. Wives averaged 27.2 ( $SD = 4.9$ ) years old and had received 16.3 ( $SD = 1.9$ ) years of education. Sixty-eight percent were employed full-time and 13.5% were full-time students. Seventy-five percent of wives identified themselves as White, 15.2% as Hispanic/Latino, 2.3% as Asian American, and 3.5% as African American. About 50% of the sample was Christian. The median combined income of couples was \$60,000.

As in Study 4, this study relies on data collected one year after their initial recruitment (Time 3 wave). At Time 3, 158 couples were still married and participating in the study, 1 couple (0.6%) had divorced, 7 couples (4.1%) had separated, and 5 couples (2.9%) were still married, but did not provide data due to time restrictions or relocation. Couples were contacted and scheduled for an on campus laboratory session. During the laboratory session, couples engaged in two videotaped 8-minute discussions. For each discussion, one spouse was asked to identify an area of difficulty in the marriage and to discuss the problem with the partner, with the goal of

working toward some resolution on the issue. Spouses were encouraged not to choose the same issues. Couples were paid \$75 for this portion of the study.

### **Language Analyses**

To obtain a representative sample of verbal communication between the spouses, one discussion from each couple was randomly selected and transcribed. Three discussions were inaudible and unable to be transcribed, leaving a total of 134 transcribed conversations. Out of these discussions, 41.0% were topics chosen by the husband, 56.0% were the first topic the couple discussed, and husbands spoke first in 46.3% of the discussions. Transcripts were segmented by speaker, producing two aggregate text files for each discussion. The transcribed conversations were then analyzed using the 2007 version of LIWC (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007) which calculates the percentage of words in a text that fall into each of 15 function word categories, several of which overlap hierarchically (e.g., first-person singular pronouns are subcategory of personal pronouns). Percentages of nine non-overlapping function word categories were calculated: personal pronouns (e.g., I, you), impersonal pronouns (e.g., this, it), articles (e.g., a, the), auxiliary verbs (e.g., am, have), high-frequency adverbs (e.g., very, well), prepositions (e.g., in, around), conjunctions (e.g., but, while), negations (e.g., not, no), and quantifiers (e.g., many, few) .

LSM scores for each word category was calculated using a simple weighted difference score, computed by first dividing the absolute value of the difference between the same category in two text samples by the sum of those two values, and then subtracting this divided from one, such that higher scores indicate higher degrees of LSM. For example, the LSM score for pronoun use between text 1 and text 2 was calculated as follows:

$$\text{LSM}_{\text{pronouns}} = 1 - [(\text{pronoun}_1 - \text{pronoun}_2) / (\text{pronoun}_1 + \text{pronoun}_2 + .0001)]$$

In this formula,  $\text{pronoun}_1$  is the percentage of pronouns in the first text, and  $\text{pronoun}_2$  is the percentage of pronouns in the second text. The denominator, .0001, is added to prevent possible empty sets. The word category LSM scores were averaged to calculate a composite LSM score that was the same for husbands and wives. The composite score was bounded by 0 and 1; higher scores indicated greater matching with the partner. Descriptive statistics are found in Table 22.

LSM scores were regressed on the identity merger modes for both spouses, controlling for word count, which spouse spoke first in the conversation, which spouse chose the topic of conversation, the importance of the conversation for each spouse, and the severity of the topic for each spouse. I predicted that both the fused-self and forfeited-self modes would be positively correlated with LSM. As high scorers of both modes take on the partner's identity to form the relational self, they should also portray evidence of adopting their partner's speaking styles. Furthermore, I predicted that the correlation between the forfeited-self mode and LSM would be stronger than the correlation between the fused-self mode and LSM. This is because highly fused-self individuals retain their personal identity as well, and so I would expect their language use to change less drastically than highly forfeited-self individuals, who take on their partner's characteristics at the cost of their own identity. The imperialistic-self mode, in contrast, will be negatively correlated with LSM. Because highly imperialistic-self individuals do not take on their partner's identity to form the relational self, they should not portray evidence of adopting their partner's speaking styles.

## **Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics for all measures in Study 7 can be found in Table 22. In general, LSM scores were fairly high. Furthermore, spousal ratings of the importance and severity of the topic were high.

Variable	Husbands				Wives			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
			Potential	Actual			Potential	Actual
Fused-Self	5.6	1.1	1-7	2.0-7.0	5.6	1.3	1-7	1.0-7.0
Forfeited-Self	3.5	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0	2.8	1.5	1-7	1.0-7.0
Imperialistic-Self	3.1	1.7	1-7	1.0-6.0	3.8	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0
LSM Score*	.89	.03	0-1	.78-.95				
Importance of Topic	5.4	1.4	1-7	1.0-7.0	5.8	1.4	1-7	1.0-7.0
Severity of Topic	4.8	1.7	1-7	1.0-7.0	5.0	1.6	1-7	1.0-7.0

\*Each couple only had one LSM score.

Table 22: Descriptive Statistics for Study 7

Among husbands, scores on the imperialistic-self mode were marginally negatively linked to LSM,  $\beta = -.17, p = .069$ . Scores on the fused-self and imperialistic-self modes were not significantly linked to LSM,  $\beta$ 's  $< .02, p$ 's  $> .853$ . No significant effects emerged for wives,  $\beta$ 's  $< .140, p$ 's  $> .188$ . The lack of effects, again, may be due to the limited range of LSM scores present in the sample. The marginal effect of highly forfeited-self husbands displaying lower linguistic style matching than their less-imperialistic counterparts, however, did support the idea that highly imperialistic-self individuals experienced less influence from their partners than their less-imperialistic counterparts.

### General Discussion

While previous research has highlighted the importance of *magnitude* of self-other mergers in couples, researchers have yet to examine the ramifications of the *manner* in which

such mergers unfold. I conducted seven studies that focused on three modes of mergers: fused-self, forfeited-self and imperialistic-self. The goal of the studies were to a) demonstrate that these modes of identity merger predict relationship quality and responses to relationship difficulties and threats beyond the simple *degree* of self-other merger, and b) explore the nature of these identity merger modes by examining behavioral evidence of self versus partner salience as well as how much individuals are influenced by their partners. I first discuss the implications of the first set of studies (Studies 1-5) before discussing the contributions of the second set of studies (Studies 6-7).

### **Implications of Studies 1-5**

Overall, the findings suggest that the three modes of identity merger each give rise to unique responses to relationship challenges and predict different relationship trajectories. Importantly, all of the findings I described above held up while controlling for other measures of relational bonds, suggesting that identity merger modes represent a distinct construct that uniquely affects relationship well-being. For example, those who scored high on the fused-self mode consistently reported higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in the relationship than less-fused participants. Moreover, both correlational and experimental evidence indicate that highly fused-self participants were more likely to engage in adaptive responses to relationship conflict and threat than their less-fused counterparts. These associations were statistically mediated by agency, suggesting that increased feelings of personal agency in the relationship accounted for relational well-being. These findings were analogous to those reported in investigations of identity fusion in which the high personal agency of fused individuals led them

to endorse fighting and dying for their group when their group was threatened (Swann et al., 2010).

Relative to their less-forfeited counterparts, high scorers on the forfeited-self scale reported higher levels of commitment to, but not satisfaction with, their relationships. Furthermore, the link between the forfeited-self mode and relationship commitment was not mediated by agency, which suggests that these individuals remained committed to the relationship despite reporting lacking agency in their relationships. Studies 3 and 4 revealed that highly forfeited-self participants also reported engaging in more maladaptive responses to relationship conflicts than their less-forfeited counterparts, and this association was mediated by feelings of agency. Thus, the lack of relationship agency experienced by these individuals seemed to interfere with effective relationship coping. Also, analogous to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) wherein group members passively internalize the characteristics of the group, Study 5 demonstrated that highly forfeited-self participants experienced a decrease in self-esteem when given negative feedback about their relationships, apparently internalizing relationship threats. This did not happen to the highly fused-self participants as their personal identity was resilient to threats to the relational self.

Finally, endorsing the imperialistic self-mode was not associated with relationship satisfaction or commitment. Interestingly, highly imperialistic-self participants did not differ from the other two modes in interdependence levels and closeness. Apparently, on average, these individuals valued their relationships just as much as highly fused-self and forfeited-self individuals, it is just that their dedication to their relationships was more situationally dependent than the other two modes. These individuals may be very dedicated to their relationships when

their relationships are going well. When they experience relationship conflicts, however, highly imperialistic-self participants may be especially likely to engage in behaviors that are destructive to the relationship. Indeed my findings showed that when experiencing relationship conflicts, they were more likely to blame their partners for transgressions, were less forgiving of their partners, and less accommodating in their responses to relationship conflict than their less-imperialistic counterparts.

### **Implications of Studies 6-7**

Studies 1-5 were designed to demonstrate that the identity merger modes have unique predictive effects on personal and relational outcomes; however they did not consider the nature of these identity merger modes. That is, they did not test whether the identity merger modes actually differed in the prominence of the personal self in the relationship, an issue addressed by Studies 6 and 7. Indeed, highly fused-self individuals reflected an identity merger that equally incorporated the partner and personal selves to form a relational self. This finding shed insight on why highly fused-self individuals may respond effectively to relationship difficulties; they may be motivated to engage in pro-relationship behaviors because their partners contribute significantly to their identities, and they also have the ability to do so because they are able to retain their personal selves – and consequently their personal agency -- within their relationships.

In contrast to highly fused-self participants, the identity mergers of highly forfeited-self individuals disproportionately featured the partner self over the personal self in forming a relational self. Attributes of the partners of highly forfeited-self individuals were more salient to them than their own; furthermore, highly forfeited-self husbands adopted their partner's manner of speech more than their less-forfeited counterparts. These findings shed insight on why highly

forfeited-self individuals may not be able to respond effectively to relationship difficulties; they are not able to retain their personal selves – and consequently their personal agency -- within their relationships.

Contrary to my predictions, highly imperialistic-self participants did not demonstrate that their personal attributes were particularly salient to them. As predicted, however, neither did these individuals incorporate their partner's attributes into the relational self. These findings, along with the findings that highly imperialistic-self individuals reported lower feelings of relationship agency suggest that more empirical work is required to truly understand the nature of the imperialistic-self mode. As I suggested earlier, it could be that highly imperialistic-self individuals try to “impose” their identities onto others to compensate for a low sense of identity strength. This possibility should be explored more thoroughly in the future. Nevertheless, my results demonstrated that highly imperialistic-self individuals tended to respond maladaptively to relationship threats and challenges.

### **Are Identity Merger Modes Person-Specific or Relationship-Specific?**

Some evidence indicated that the identity merger modes were relationship-specific. Results from Study 1 suggested that people's scores on identity merger modes did not stay consistent across relationships. Results from Study 2 found lack of evidence that the identity merger modes were strongly related to personality traits. These results together seemed to suggest that identity merger modes resulted from situational contexts surrounding the relationship, and are not necessarily individual differences. Furthermore, the low correlations among the identity merger modes within couples in Study 4 suggested that identity merger modes were peoples' construals of their relationships, and that romantic partners did not



necessarily agree on their construals of the relationship. This finding pointed to the idea that identity merger modes arose from an interaction between the individual's perspectives and the unique dynamic between the individual and his or her current partner.

Still, whether identity merger modes are person-specific or relationship-specific cannot be conclusively answered within this dissertation. Further investigation on the antecedents to the merger modes will better address this issue. It could be that one's self-concept clarity at the time of relationship initiation can influence whether one draws his or her relational self more from the partner or the personal self. In this scenario, the identity merger modes are person-specific, but can vary greatly across time. It could also be that identity merger modes arise based on the relative social standing of the relationship partners. In this scenario, the identity merger modes are more relationship-specific. These possibilities should be examined in future research.

### **Unique Contribution of Identity Merger Modes**

Importantly, these identity merger modes were the first to examine the manner with which identities can merge within relationships. Understanding identity merger modes through social identity and identity fusion theories illuminates how identity merger can influence feelings of agency and thus the ability to respond adaptively to relationship difficulties. Previous theories of relational bonds such as interdependence or attachment may have similar – if not stronger – predictive abilities on relationship quality do not address the role of agency. Additionally, the link between the merger modes and agency can uniquely shed light on why some find it difficult to leave low-quality relationships as in the cases of domestic abuse or sex trafficking victims. For example, many sex trafficking victims seem capable of leaving their pimps as they can find resources and aid elsewhere. They display secure attachments to their pimps, and are extremely

confident of their pimps' affection and care for them (see Lloyd, 2011). Yet, the victims may draw so much of their identities from their pimps that they lose themselves and their sense of agency, preventing them from reacting adaptively to transgressions and conflicts they face in their "relationships". Further studies are needed to investigate the potential contributions of unique identity merger modes in explaining phenomena such as sex trafficking, a topic which remain largely unexplored within psychological literature.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The current studies contained several strengths in their methodology and design which enhanced my confidence in the results. Foremost among these strengths was the use of both correlational and experimental data to examine the hypotheses. Moreover, all analyses controlled for several relational factors known to influence individuals' relationship functioning (i.e. degree of self-other overlap, attachment style, interdependence) when examining identity merger effects. Thus, the current findings highlighted the unique importance of identity merger modes for relationship well-being.

Despite these strengths, the studies were limited in that all mediational analyses relied on data collected from a single session. As such, my evidence is limited to statistical mediation only. I did attempt to rule out alternative causal models by reordering the variables and running separate analyses with relationship quality or responses to conflict as the mediator, and agency as the outcome. Relationship quality and responses to conflict did not significantly fully mediate the relationship between identity merger modes and agency. I also ran a separate analysis with agency as the predictor, identity merger modes as the mediator and relationship quality as the outcome. The modes did not significantly mediate the relationship between agency and

relationship quality. Thus, while causal inferences cannot definitively be drawn from our data, my results are consistent with the interpretation that the three modes of identity merger may differentially influence feelings of agency within the relationship, which in turn influence relationship outcomes.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

These studies are the first to associate different modes of merger between a personal and relational self with various aspects of close relationships. Future research might explore the antecedents of these merger modes including prior relationship history, individual characteristics, and self-motivations. For example, it could be that older, more experienced individuals are more inclined to endorse the fused-self mode than younger persons. Similarly, those who score low on self-concept clarity or form the relationship in a time of personal crisis may be disposed to endorse the forfeited self mode while people who are high in self-certainty are more inclined to endorse the fused self mode. Importantly, the intentions and motivations with which people enter into relationships may have implications on how their identities change in their relationships. Longitudinal research might examine the long term effects of the identity merger modes on the self and relationship, including their effects on break-ups and break-up recovery.

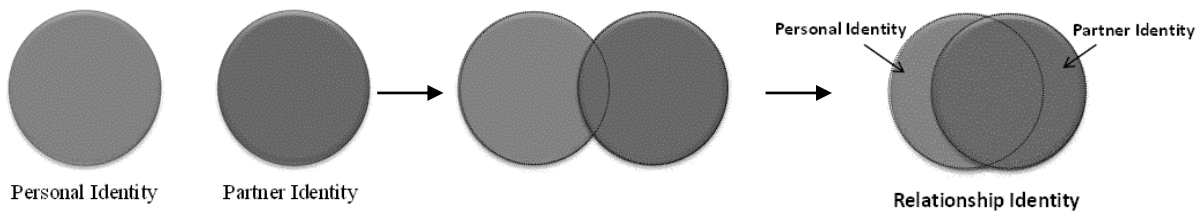
Alternatively, the *actual* merger modes of the partner may be less important than people's *perceptions* of his or her mode. In this scenario, individuals who score high on the forfeited-self mode may fare better as long as they *perceive* that their partner scores high on the fused-self mode. These and related possibilities are ripe for investigation.

## Appendix A Identity Merger Modes Pictorial Scale

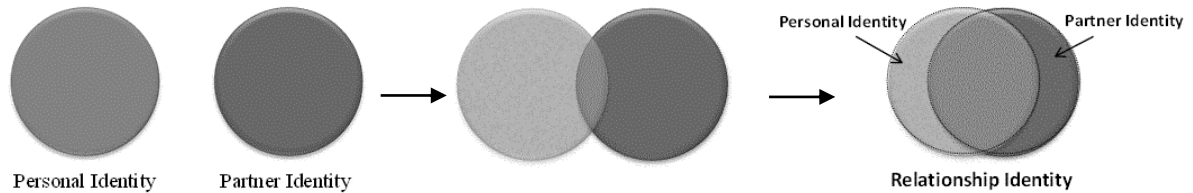
Relationships vary a lot in the degree to which each partner influences the couple's identity. Some people are happy to simply "go with the flow" and let their partner shape the couple identity by make most of the decisions about what to do and how to relate to one another. Other people like to be the one who shapes the couple identity. Still other people like everything to be balanced, with each partner contributing equally to the couple identity.

This suggests that there are three distinct ways that people can merge into a couple. We will refer to these as models A, B, and C.

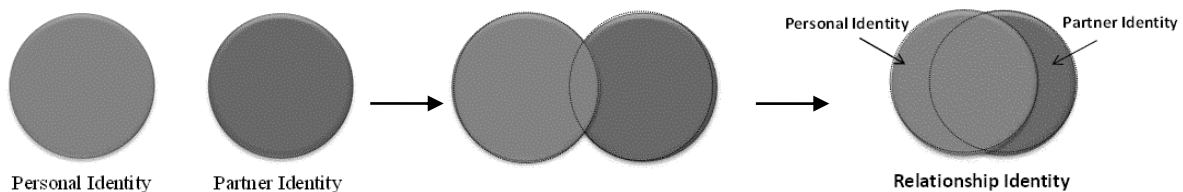
**Model A:** In our relationship, I "go with the flow" and let my partner make most of the decisions about what we do and how we relate to one another, even if it meant sacrificing my personal preferences.



**Model B:** In our relationship, my partner and I both have an equal say in what we do and how we relate to one another.



**Model C:** In our relationship, I make most of the decisions about what we do and how we relate to one another, and my partner goes with the flow.



## **Appendix B**

### **Identity Influence Items**

Please rate each aspect of your relationship.

(items are recoded on a scale from -3 to +3 where -3 is partner influences more)

#### Identity Prominence

1. My own identity is always the most prominent in our relationship.
2. My own identity is usually the most prominent in our relationship.
3. My own identity is occasionally the most prominent in our relationship.
4. My own identity and the identity of my partner share equal prominence in our relationship.
5. My partner's identity is occasionally the most prominent in our relationship.
6. My partner's identity is usually the most prominent in our relationship.
7. My partner's identity is always the most prominent in our relationship.

#### Identity influence

1. I always try to be who my partner wants me to be
2. I usually try to be who my partner wants me to be
3. I occasionally try to be who my partner wants me to be
4. My partner and I equally take on each other's identities
5. My partner occasionally tries to be who I want him or her to be
6. My partner usually tries to be who I want him or her to be
7. My partner always tries to be who I want him or her to be

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