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# Relationships and the self-concept

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## Abstract

Progress in the study of relationships has depended in part on the recognition that relationships have properties not relevant to interactions or to the behavior of individuals, and may require additional principles of explanation. This has led to an emphasis on relationships as linking individuals. In this article we argue that relationship processes occur in the heads of individuals, with the participants having their own idiosyncratic views of the relationship as well as a shared one. The relationship is both affected by and affects the self-concepts of the participants, so that the influences of the self-concept may be critical for understanding the properties and dynamics of relationships. Furthermore, consideration of the self-concept can assist in the integration of different but not necessarily incompatible explanations for the same relationship phenomena.

In the course of the twentieth century, questions concerning the nature of the “self” have been in and out of fashion. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when introspection was respectable, the “self” came very much into vogue (James, 1890). With the rise of behaviorism, however, the study of subjective phenomena fell into disrepute among experimental psychologists, and it became the province of clinicians. In recent decades, partly as a result of the cognitive revolution, studies of the “self” are returning to favor (e.g., Baumeister, 1999; Modell, 1993; Scheibe, 1998; Wylie, 1974/79). In studies of relationships, also, the role of the “self” is beginning to receive more recognition but, we suggest, not all that it deserves.

One reason that the “self” has not received more overt recognition in studies of relationships lies in the history of research in this area. Although there were of course precursors (Fincham, 1995), the specialized study of personal relationships is only two or

three decades old. Before that, psychology was concerned primarily with individuals or with groups of individuals. Such studies of relationships that did exist mostly involved a clinical approach, often top-heavy with theory, which focused on the particulars of individual cases and thus did not lend themselves to the production of generalizations whose validity could be assessed. It became apparent that relationships, of prime importance in the lives of nearly everyone, required study in their own right.

Three principles were basic in the sub-discipline that emerged. First, dyadic relationships involve two individuals, and they concern what goes on between them. Second, they depend on cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes, and they involve a series of interactions over time between two individuals such that each interaction is affected by previous ones and perhaps by expectations of further interactions in the future. Third, relationships have properties in addition to those of the interactions on which they are based, and interactions have properties additional to those of individual behavior. For instance, the extent to which the partners reveal themselves about im-

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We are very grateful to the referees for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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portant issues to each other in the course of interacting is an issue irrelevant to the behavior of an isolated individual (e.g., Hinde, 1979).

Such issues led to an emphasis on relationships as *linking* individuals, and it became usual to write in terms such as "the relationship *between A and B*." This has been taken to refer either to the relationship as perceived by an outsider or, more importantly, to the participants' commonly held intersubjective view of the relationship. But the processes on which relationships depend go on, by-and-large, in the head of each participant, with partial independence from what is going on in the head of the other. For instance, *A* and *B* may both see their relationship in positive terms (the aspect held in common), but *A* may feel committed to the relationship while *B* does not. Perhaps, therefore, in addition to the emphasis proposed earlier by one of us (Hinde, 1972, 1979) and implicit in many current studies, we should think also of *A*'s relationship with *B* and *B*'s relationship with *A*. This implies both common ground in how *A* and *B* see the relationship and differences in how they do so. Relationship phenomena are incorporated into the self-system, so this implies further that modifications to *A*'s self-system consequent upon formation of the relationship with *B* will differ in some respects from those to *B*'s.

We are not suggesting that this involves a new approach, though it could imply a considerable change in emphasis. Many social psychologists think in this way, and they devise their studies from this perspective, though this is seldom explicitly acknowledged. Such an approach is also important for many clinical psychologists. Many individuals who seek help with a problematic relationship are convinced on the basis of past events that they are correct in their perception of what their partner thinks and feels, and the therapist may need to demonstrate that that is not necessarily the case, but part of a narrative that they have created in their own heads (Fitzpatrick, 1987). Indeed, this approach has a long history in clinical psychology. Freud (1917) wrote of

relationships being transposed from the external world into the self; Fairbairn (1952) wrote about relationships as endopsychic structures; Bowlby (1969) referred to the "internal working models" elaborated by each participant; and Laing (1969; Laing et al., 1966) differentiated *A*'s relationship with *B* from *B*'s with *A*. More recently, Stevenson-Hinde (cited in Stern, 1995; see also Stevenson-Hinde, 1990) has emphasized how mother and baby form representations of their interactions, which both influence and are influenced by their internal working models, and may carry over into interactions with others.

In this report we argue that research on relationships may be facilitated by greater attention to the self-systems of the participants in three ways. First, the self-concept affects, and is affected by, how the participants behave. Second, the self-system mediates the effects of culture on relationships. And third, a greater focus on the self-concepts of the participants may facilitate the integration of research and reconcile different explanations of the same relationship phenomena. To that end we emphasize for theoretical reasons, as have others on methodological/statistical grounds (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1999; Griffin & Gonzalez, 1995; Kenny & LaVoie, 1984; Manke & Plomin, 1997), that two-person relationships should be studied both at the level of the dyad and of the individual, and that it is theoretically crucial to include the concept of the self in most studies of relational processes.

### The Self-Concept

If the processes on which relationships depend go on in the heads of the individuals involved, should the "self" be given more prominence in studies of relationships? One difficulty is that the concept of the "self" is a slippery one. "Self" is an everyday term. As we see ourselves behaving differently according to the situation, and as we see ourselves changing with age, we account for the continuity in our lives by postulating a self, and we assume that other people have "selves" too.

Writers on the “self” have often been shy of defining it precisely. However, recently Baumeister (1999) has indicated that three major human experiences form the bases of selfhood. These are: (1) The experience of reflective consciousness: An individual is aware of self by observing how he or she behaves or by inference from social events. (2) Interpersonal being: The first things that a child learns about itself involve its connections with others, and social development consists largely of learning how to adjust one’s behavior according to partner(s) and context. In doing so, the individual forms perceptions of relationships and contexts, some of which the person shares with others involved. (3) The executive self, which makes choices, initiates action, and so on. On this view, the self exists both in the person’s own head and in the intersubjective world in which the person is immersed. These several aspects of the self echo the concerns of earlier writers.

For James (1890) consciousness of self was an aspect of the stream of thought—or, perhaps more precisely, the stream of consciousness *was* the “self.” Because we talk about our own self, the question immediately arises, who is it who is perceiving the own-self? James recognized an “I,” which does the perceiving, and a “Me,” which is the perceived, empirical self. He also distinguished three constituents of the empirical self, differing in their concerns—the material self, concerned with objects, places, and so forth; the social self, concerned with interactions and relationships; and the spiritual self, concerned with speculations about ultimate reality. While emphasizing the unity and continuity of the self, related to the continuity in the individual’s stream of thought, James also referred to a plurality of selves, especially in the social sphere.

Freud, rejecting phenomenology, made little use of the concept of “self,” but it was implicit in his structural concept of the “ego,” which he referred to as if it were an objective entity, or at least a coherent organization of mental processes.

Baldwin (1897), Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), and others developed related con-

cepts of the self in which it is viewed as constructed by the individual as a consequence of interaction with others. More recently, several models concerned with how information is stored in the self-concept have been proposed (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Fletcher & Fitness, 1996; Greene & Geddes, 1988; Harvey, Agostinelli, & Weber, 1989; Honeycutt, 1993). As might be expected, there are considerable differences in detail concerning the concepts of the self, and how it functions, proposed by these investigators (see, e.g., Modell, 1993; Scheibe, 1998). For most, the information stored is seen as including aspects of relationships with others, the social context, and norms.

Scheibe (1998) distinguishes between the “self” and “identity” but again carefully avoids precisely defining either, except by example: Dead persons can have identity but no self; for many people, God has a self but no identity; and living persons have both. This may seem not to get us very far, but it serves to focus attention on an issue that can be treated with some degree of objectivity, namely identity. Scheibe contrasted “self” with “identity” and saw “identity” primarily as how an individual is seen by others. But if we take a person’s identity to be what that person sees himself or herself as being, then “identity” becomes close to “self-concept,” defined as the person’s “mental representation of his or her own personality” (Kihlstrom et al., 1988), or how a person describes and feels about him/herself. Of course, individuals’ self-descriptions may not be “true.” For example, Winnicott (1958) presented evidence that intrusive mothers may lead infants to present a false outer self that does not represent the “real” inner experience. And although congruency appears to increase with age (Harter, 1998), a variety of defense mechanisms, conscious and unconscious, bias the pictures that people present of themselves toward how they would like to be seen (see below) or to how they see themselves as possibly becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

However, if active dissembling can be ruled out, how people would like to behave

is related to how they see themselves, as exemplified by the innumerable studies of how people evaluate themselves (self-esteem) (Baumeister, 1993). From here on, therefore, we shall evade the problem of the nature of the "self" and take "self" to refer to the "self-concept." "Self-esteem" is taken to be one aspect of the self-concept. The difficulty in definition arises in part because it is difficult to define the "self" without referring to the "self," as in "The self-concept is how one sees oneself," unless one uses James's model and speaks of "how the I sees the Me." That, however, is inadequate because, as we shall argue shortly, the "self-concept" includes much more than "Me."

We are certainly not claiming that there is general agreement as to how the self-concept can serve as a precisely quantifiable variable. We shall, however, argue that it can serve as means for integrating diverse aspects of relationships.

Three features of the self-concept are relevant to the present discussion. First, although processes of maturation are involved (Kagan, 1989), it develops out of social interaction; how we perceive ourselves is affected by how we perceive or have perceived others to perceive us (see above; Higgins, Loeb, & Moretti, 1995). Most important are the views of those with whom we have or have had close relationships, and especially those in our family of origin (Bowlby, 1969). It is as though we tell ourselves stories based on our behavioral interactions, and use those stories to tell ourselves what sort of people we are (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

Thus, Schauger and Schoeneman (1979) reviewed 56 studies which tested the idea that one's self-concept is a reflection of others' perceptions and opinions of the self. There was little agreement between people's self-perceptions and how they were *actually* perceived by others, with half of the studies showing no significant relation. However, consistent with our argument, there was considerable agreement between people's self-perceptions and how they *perceived* others to perceive them. It thus seems that people do not accurately per-

ceive others' opinions of their selves, but that people's self-concepts are related rather to their *perceptions* of others' opinions, and thus to "A's relationship with B" and vice versa (see also Fletcher & Fitness, 1996; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990).<sup>1</sup> Comparison with others is of special importance in one aspect of one's self-concept, namely in how one evaluates oneself—one's self-esteem. In five experimental studies, Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs (1995) obtained convincing evidence that self-esteem varies as a function of perceived social acceptance versus rejection. Perceived social acceptance was related to greater state self-esteem (cf. Heatherton & Polivy, 1991); social rejection was related to less self-esteem.

Second, and related to this developmental issue, the self-concept should not be seen as a static structure, but as changing with age, situation, and so on (e.g., Harter, 1998; Scheier & Carver, 1988). That it changes with age follows from a developmental perspective, for development continues throughout life. In addition, people see themselves differently according to the situation they are in. For instance, children and adolescents tend to see themselves differently in home and school, emphasizing passivity more in the family context, activity in the school; and individuals refer to their ethnic background when they belong to a group, which is rare in their situation, and to their sex if they are in a minority sex at home (McGuire & McGuire, 1988). In other words, how people see themselves is context dependent. Harry Stack Sullivan went so far as to suggest that each person had as many personalities as he has interpersonal relationships (Perry, 1982, p. 108).

Thus, in view of such findings, the self may be seen not as a unitary structure, but

1. Authors differ in the precise nature of the relations between the individual, others, and society. Furthermore, whereas social psychologists have tended to see the relations between individual and society as generally positive, Freud and other psychoanalysts saw the individual as primary and tended to see individual and society as opposed (Scheibe, 1998).

as multiple, or as networks and hierarchies of increasingly context-specific self-concepts (Kihlstrom et al., 1988). Individuals behave as though they were choosing between the many selves they might be. This may involve selecting according to outside influences (e.g., peer pressure), or according to one's perceptions of one's abilities, thereby enhancing one's self-esteem. Baumeister (1998), however, puts the emphasis slightly differently: Pointing to the difficulty of maintaining different personalities in different social contexts, he argues that different others know the same self but that different aspects of this same self are activated in different contexts. In either case, each view implies that the self-concept must include, or imply, information about the several contexts in which it operates.<sup>2</sup> Such contexts include the various relationships in which the individual is involved. Whether it is preferable to regard such information as existing within the self-concept, or as readily available to it, is a matter that need not overly concern us. In some contexts the term "self-system," seen as embracing the self-concept and the relevant contexts, seems preferable. To ensure that that issue is kept in mind, we use "self-system" as an alternative where it seems especially appropriate.

Third, the self must be seen as an active agent, providing expectancies and directing attention to whatever is of significance to the individual: This function James (1890) ascribed to the "I." There is, of course, potential circularity here, for we may judge whether an object is significant by whether the individual pays attention to it. But more importantly, as discussed below, individuals actively seek to maintain, integrate, enhance, or expand the self. We shall see later that this activity affects many of the properties of relationships.

## The Self-Concept and Relationships

One aim of this article is to suggest that it is essential to study both what goes on *between* individuals, and what goes on *within* individuals, and that the self-concept is an underused tool in this endeavor. Here we consider relations between the self-concept and behavior, including the ways in which individuals try to maintain and expand the self, and the relation of the self-concept to relationships.

### *The self-concept and behavior.*

There seems to be some relation between how one sees oneself and how one behaves. For instance, the form of messages exchanged in conversation is much influenced by the sender's assessment of his or her status relative to that of the recipient (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1992). As another example, the reception of an offer of social support is affected by the extent to which it affects the recipient's self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitaker-Alagna, 1982).

This notion was elaborated especially by Goffman (1959), though he viewed the self as more ephemeral than is suggested here. On his view, individuals in interaction project their own definition of the situation, in conformity with their own traditions and experience. Each thereby influences the "definition of the situation" of the other. In a successful interaction, a single definition of the situation is constructed, and both partners build up lines of constructive action. This process involves adjustments to how they see themselves. Applying this idea to a succession of interactions within a relationship, the participants would bring to each interaction a self-concept changed by, or having access to, experiences of previous interactions.

Influences between the self-concept and behavior operate in both directions. In the case of conversation and relative status, the self-concept affects behavior. Behavior is also likely to affect the self-concept, because both how we see our own behavior

2. It is reasonable to suggest that the functioning of the self-concept has been shaped by natural selection. In the course of human evolution, reproductive success must have depended in part on the ability to fit behavior to the situation, and to monitor that one is doing so.

and how we see others behave toward us affect how we see ourselves. However, some interactions are influenced by the self-concept but leave it little affected. Thus, a self-important individual who sees himself to have been insulted may expostulate but leave the situation with his self-concept little changed. By contrast, falling in love may be related to profound changes in the self-concept; the lover may feel himself or herself to be transformed. Aron and Aron (1986, 1995) picture the formation of a close relationship as including the other in the self—a metaphor for describing how the self becomes modified as a consequence of interacting with the other (see below). Huston and Houts (1998, pp. 140–141) found “substantial and consistent correlations between both men’s and women’s personality characteristics and the spouse’s behaviour in marriage, their feelings about each other and the relationship, and the beliefs they have about each other’s personality characteristics.”

*Congruency* An aspect of mutual influences between self-concept and behavior, which is of special significance for interpersonal relationships, concerns the maintenance of “congruency.” The self-concept provides continuity through the changing scenes of life, and much of our behavior can be seen as attempts to maintain its consistency. Thus, many aspects of human behavior can be understood on the assumption that we seek to validate the views we have of ourselves. Individuals tend to defend the constancy of their self-concepts and to believe that, although experiences may affect them, they remain essentially the same persons. Backman (1988) has suggested that this process involves maintaining “congruency” between how we see ourselves, how we see ourselves behaving, and our perceptions of the relevant behaviors, feelings, and perceptions of others. Hence, a woman who sees herself as honest, perceives herself to be behaving honestly, and finds that others seem to trust her, experiences congruency. However, if other people seem not to trust her, she experiences lack of congruency.

Lack of congruency is seen as threatening, and people attempt to adjust their perceptions, narratives, or behavior to restore congruency. Among the ways in which they do this are:

1. *Cognitive restructuring.* One may misperceive one’s own behavior (“I was behaving honestly, really”) or that of others (“They do not really understand the complexity of the issues”); attend selectively to evidence that confirms one’s self-concept (“Do not listen to him; he judges others by himself and never trusts anyone”); or interpret the behavior of others to support one’s self-concept (“It is not that he is kind-hearted; he lends me money because he trusts me”).
2. *Selective evaluation.* Altering the relative importance of items to augment congruency (Not noticing the hesitation before another agrees to lend one money).
3. *Selective interaction.* Associating with others who provide congruency (Avoiding those who might doubt one’s honesty).
4. *Response evocation.* Behaving in such a way that others confirm one’s self-image (Striving to appear open and straightforward).
5. *Selective comparison* (Contrasting oneself with someone known to be dishonest).

Such processes, mostly subconscious, tend to preserve the self-concept. The aspects of the self-concept involved will, of course, vary with the nature of the relationship.

This point raises the question of the relative importance of maintenance of the self-concept in comparison with either the desire to maintain a favorable view of the self or to see oneself accurately. Sedikides (1993) conducted a series of studies to compare the potency of the self-enhancement motive, the self-verification motive (i.e., attempts to maintain congruency in the self-

concept; Swann, 1987), and the self-assessment motive (attempts to gain accurate knowledge about the self). Manipulating the type of feedback that subjects obtained about their self-concepts, Sedikides examined whether preference for feedback varied across the three types of motives. In all of six experiments the self-enhancement motive was the strongest, followed by the self-verification motive. The self-assessment motive was by comparison not very influential. Thus, perceiving oneself accurately appears to be a less powerful motive than seeing oneself in a positive light. However, outside the laboratory motivational accessibility may be affected by the nature of the relationship: Swann, de la Ronde, and Hixon (1994) found that individuals in dating relationships rated their satisfaction/intimacy lowest if the partner's appraisal were less positive than the subject's self-rating, higher if it were the same, and highest if it were greater. By contrast, married couples rated their own satisfaction/intimacy highest if their partner's view coincided with their own. The investigators suggest that courtship is a period in which partners evaluate each other and want to be seen favorably, whereas married individuals prefer that their partners perceive their weaknesses as much as their strengths.

#### *Quality and expansion of the self-concept*

In keeping with the importance of the self-enhancement motive, Steele (1988) has pointed out that individuals do more than preserve congruency, in that they strive to sustain a self-concept that is competent, stable, good, well-integrated, and so on. Evidence for this view includes the finding that a threat to one aspect of the self may be met by affirming another central and highly valued aspect.

Furthermore, individuals tend simultaneously to expand the self, as occurs in the formation of a close relationship, and to enhance their self-esteem. Thus, individuals seek out relationships that enable them to express characteristics they believe to be self-defining, and which will lead to them

being evaluated positively. Aron and Aron (1986) found that the number of content domains (e.g., social status, family relationships, major emotions) in students' self-descriptions increased as a consequence of falling in love, which was associated also with enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Individuals are also motivated to maintain momentary states of positive evaluation. They tend to associate with others who are superior to themselves in activities that are not self-relevant, thereby basking in reflected glory, or with others who are inferior to themselves in activities that are self-defining, thereby profiting from the comparison (Tesser, 1988; Pilkington, Tesser, & Stephens, 1991). In the longer term, forming new relationships, the search for novelty, and the desire to explore can all be seen as involving expansion of the self-concept.

Maintenance of the self-concept and expansion of the self-concept can be seen as contradictory desiderata. However, some relationships involve both maintenance and expansion. Thus, Wright (e.g., 1984) stresses that friendships are formed because they facilitate the goals that people have with respect to their self-concept. These include self-esteem, confirmation of issues that one feels to be positive about oneself, and supplying new ideas and perspectives. Diverse functions of friendship have been postulated (Auhagen, 1996), but many of them seem to refer to the maintenance and expansion of the self—a feeling of belonging, emotional integration, and stability; the opportunity to discover oneself; spiritual, emotional, and physical support; and showing evidence that one is valuable as a person.

#### *Actor, partner, and relationship effects.*

In recent years, the literature has emphasized that focusing on only one partner gives an incomplete picture of what is going on in a relationship (e.g., Bartle-Haring, Kenny, & Gavazzi, 1999; Cook, 1993; Kenny & Kashy, 1991). To rectify this, Auhagen (1987) obtained diary records from both partners of friendships, but few have followed her lead.

In a more artificial situation, a number of studies have examined both participants' perceptions of an interaction (e.g., Noller, 1987).

Another route for studying relational phenomena and processes involves considering interactions between partners in relationships, or between all members of a family or social group (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997; Manke & Plomin, 1997). The Social Relations Model (SRM) was developed to enable separation of the variance associated with each partner from that associated with the relationship itself (Kenny & LaVoie, 1984). This model involves obtaining data from each member of a relationship or group concerning their judgments of one another or their behavioral interactions. This procedure permits assessment of (a) Actor effects—a person's tendency to behave in a similar way to every partner or to perceive all partners in a similar way; (b) Partner effects—a person's tendency to elicit similar behavior or perceptions from others; (c) Relationship effects—factors that are unique to the particular relationship between *A* and *B*; and, if applicable, (d) Family or group effects—behaviors or perceptions that are shared by and/or affect all members in a family or group. The variance due to each of these effects can then be assessed. On the whole, research based on this paradigm indicates that both actor and relationship effects are important, and Kenny has repeatedly stressed the need to study both. This approach is in keeping with the view expressed here that "*A*'s relationship with *B*" and "*B*'s relationship with *A*" are important as well as the "relationship between *A* and *B*."

We would make two further points. First, the SRM provides an important step towards differentiating the variance due to individuals from that due to the relationship itself (though there may be contamination by error variance) but does not (yet) enable researchers to evaluate the roles of the participants' self-concepts in a particular relationship.

Second, it must be remembered that in-

dividuals are affected by their relationships. If the relationship between *A* and *B* affects *A*'s self-concept and thereby *A*'s behavior in other relationships, we can say that a relationship effect in one context has become an actor effect in another. The unidirectional effects implied by the SRM may become bi-directional over time.

In summary, we propose that the SRM suggests a route into the nature of relationships that is compatible with our emphasis on the importance of considering both *A*'s relationship with *B* as well as *B*'s relationship with *A*, but does not yet provide an adequate picture of the dynamic processes between self and relationships.

### *Properties of relationships*

We have seen that relationship formation involves adjustments to the self-concept, or at least some degree of compatibility between the self-concepts of the participants. As an extension, many of the properties of relationships can be seen as related to the self-concept. Elsewhere it has been suggested that 12 categories of dimensions are useful as pigeon-holes for the description of relationship characteristics, though with no implication that they are all-inclusive or independent (Hinde, 1997). In the following paragraphs, we address briefly each of these categories and point to the importance of the self-concept in each. While all the dimensions depend on both partners, they differ according to whether they are perceived similarly or differently by the participants, and thus whether *A*'s relationship with *B* differs from *B*'s relationship with *A*:

- (1)–(4). Four of the categories are properties of the dyad. These are the Content and Diversity of the interactions (that is, what the participants do together), and the Reciprocity and Complementarity of the interactions (that is, whether the partners behave similarly in the interactions, as when *A* kisses *B* and *B* kisses *A*, or in ways that are different but complementary, as when one dominates and the other submits). Such properties of interactions,



as well as their qualities (see below), could be described in a number of ways. For instance, Goffman (1959) would take a “dramaturgical perspective” and argue that each participant tries to “define the situation” in a way that both satisfies her or his own aims and will be acceptable to the other. Backman (1988) might argue that each acts to maintain congruency. In no way incompatible with these approaches, we suggest that such properties can be seen as resulting from each partner striving to act, or to induce the partner to act, in harmony with how she or he sees herself or himself in that relationship—that is, in harmony with one’s own self-concept

- (5) and (6). The Qualities of the interactions, and other Qualities that arise from the relative frequency and patterning of the interactions (for instance, the frequency with which partners go to the cinema together relative to the frequency with which each wants to go to the cinema) depend on both partners, but may be perceived differently by each. Thus, a traveler seeking directions may perceive the response as brusque, although the respondent feels he or she has been helpful. Though the quality of an interaction as seen by an outsider depends on both participants (the traveler may or may not have requested directions politely), perceptions of its qualities may differ between the participants, and must be seen as consequences of (as well as, perhaps, influences on) the self-concepts of the participants. Thus, the quality of an interaction may differ between *A*’s relationship with *B* and *B*’s relationship with *A*.
- (7). The next category concerns the incidence and nature of Conflict in the relationship. Three of the commonest sources of conflict—autonomy versus relatedness, self-disclosure versus privacy, and predictability versus novelty (Baxter, 1988, 1990)—can all be rephrased in terms of maintenance and expansion of the self-concept. Autonomy (acting without external constraints) involves a feel-

ing of inner endorsement of one’s actions (Deci & Ryan, 1987) and thus the unfettered expression of the self-concept, whereas relatedness involves some constraints on the self-concept in order to relate to the other and thereby expand the self. Self-disclosure involves exposing the self-concept to influences that may elicit change and perhaps lead to expansion; privacy involves the denial of that possibility, and the maintenance of the current self-concept. Predictability implies consistency in the self-concept; novelty; implies the possibility of expansion or change. Another source of conflict, jealousy, also involves a threat to the self-concept: The individual’s self-perception as “special” or “best beloved” is not shared by the partner (e.g., Buunk & Bringle, 1987). In other words, all these types of conflict stem from infringements of, or threats to, the self-concept.

In all these cases, provided neither partner suppresses her or his feelings, the occurrence of conflict is likely to be shared by both partners. However, they may differ in their views of its quality, meaning, or significance for the relationship. Thus, while the occurrence of conflict is a property of the relationship, perceptions of its nature must be seen as located within their heads and differing between them. Therefore *A*’s relationship with *B* will differ from *B*’s relationship with *A*.

- (8). The distribution of Power in a relationship is very difficult to assess, and depends on the level of analysis. As mentioned above under the more general issue of complementarity, negotiations that lead to power differentials involve the self-concepts of the participants. If the partners agree as to which of them has the power in an interaction, power can be seen as a property of the dyad. However, they may not agree. Suppose that *A* sees himself as a great footballer, and *B* sees herself as a loving and indulgent wife. If *A* plays football on a Saturday afternoon, *A* may feel he is in control, but *B* may feel

that she is in control because she likes to let *A* do what he wants to do. In such a case the partners differ in their perception of where the power lies, and it becomes a property that must be seen as located within the heads of the participants: It is then better to distinguish *A*'s relationship with *B* from *B*'s with *A*, and consideration of how the participants see themselves (their self-concepts) provides greater understanding.

- (9). Self-disclosure can be seen as a way of acquainting the partner with how one sees oneself (i.e., one's self-concept or self-system), perhaps so that the partner will act in a way that maintains one's own congruency. It may also reveal oneself as different from the views of the partner; while this may make one more vulnerable, it may also be constructive in fostering relationship growth and be used as a means to that end. Over relatively trivial matters, individuals tend to differ consistently in self-disclosure, but over more sensitive issues the amount of disclosure is a property of both participants, for there may be issues that *A* discloses to *B* but would not dream of telling *C*. Such disclosures are thus due to the special properties of *B* or of the relationship between *A* and *B* (Miller, 1990). The degree of reciprocity in disclosure varies with the type and nature of the relationship. In predominantly complementary relationships, such as those between doctor and patient or teacher and pupil, reciprocity in disclosure is usually absent. In potentially close relationships, however, self-disclosure tends to be reciprocal (e.g., Berg & Derlega, 1987; Cozby, 1973; Miller & Kenny, 1986). New acquaintances match each other's level of disclosure (Cunningham, Strassberg, & Haan, 1986). Once a relationship has been established, however, immediate self-disclosure reciprocity seems to occur less frequently (Derlega, Wilson, & Chaikin, 1976)—perhaps because the partners have more time to respond to each other (Derlega, Metts,

Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Thus, the extent to which self-disclosure is an individual characteristic, stemming from the self-concept of the individual, varies according to the nature of the relationship.

- (10). Interpersonal perception concerns the extent to which each partner sees the other as she or he "really" is, and as each sees himself or herself, and the extent to which each feels understood. Both *A* and *B* will have views of each of these factors. Such issues are clearly related to the self-concept, for how *A* perceives *B* and *A*'s relationship with *B* is influenced by how *A* sees him/herself. This issue was stressed by Laing (1969) in differentiating between *A*'s relationship with *B* and *B*'s with *A*.
- (11). A large element in Satisfaction depends on whether one believes that the partner sees one as one would like to be seen. While Veroff, Douvan, Orbach, and Acitelli (1998) found wide variation in the factors that make for happy marriages, the sense of self-affirmation in the marital relationship was one of the most important.
- Another important issue concerns the extent to which the expectations inherent in an individual's self-concept about his or her role in a relationship correspond with the actual interactions that occur (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Kelly & Burgoon, 1991; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990; Yogev & Brett, 1985). With the changes in social norms for gender relations, gender differences in behavior conducive to happy relationships have changed. Relationships in which the woman is more egalitarian or less traditional than the man tend to involve less satisfaction (Li & Caldwell, 1987), especially postpartum (Fitzpatrick, Vangelisti, & Firman, 1994; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Voelz, 1985).
- (12). Finally, one way of conceptualizing Commitment to a relationship is in terms of the extent to which the self-concept is

seen as embracing the other; as noted above, this is a metaphor used by Aron and Aron (1986) for loving. If the other (or the relationship with the other) becomes part of the self-concept (or self-system), one strives to maintain it. Again, this property may differ between *A*'s relationship with *B* and *B*'s with *A*.

Thus, many of the properties of relationships can be translated into aspects of the self-concepts of the participants—with only some aspects of the relationship represented similarly inside the heads of the participants. Hence, we would argue that a focus on the self-system would greatly facilitate the study of relationships and would aid understanding of the relations between their properties. Furthermore, such a focus implies that the nature of a relationship not only is influenced by, but also influences, the self-concepts of the participants. Like Ickes and Gonzalez (1996), we would plead for the necessity of studying both the subjective (*A*'s idiosyncratic view of the relationship) and the intersubjective (*A*'s and *B*'s shared perception of the relationship) for more complete understanding of relationship processes.

### **The Self-System and Culture**

Culture is yet another sphere that reflects the importance of the self-concept for the understanding of relationships and relationship phenomena. The culture in which people are socialized influences their self-concepts (or is embraced within their self-systems). To illustrate this point, we focus on one dimension of cultural difference. This has been characterized by Markus and colleagues (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991) as involving independent cultures (especially Western cultures), in which the focus is on individuality and autonomy, versus interdependent cultures (especially Asian cultures) where the focus is on relations with others. A comparable formulation is the dimension of individualism–collectivism (Triandis, 1988). In interdependent or collectivist cultures,

the needs, norms, and goals of the ingroup take precedence over those of the individual, whereas, the reverse holds for independent or individualist cultures. Members of interdependent cultures tend to be more concerned about others, and individuals are expected to subordinate personal feelings to the goals of the ingroup (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Hofstede, 1991), whereas in independent cultures the individual's task is to become independent from others by attending to her or his own wishes and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It is hardly surprising that attitudes toward relationships are related to this dimension of the cultural background.

For instance, in a Canadian study Dion and Dion (1993) found that young adults from Chinese and other Asian backgrounds endorsed a "love as friendship" style more strongly than did those from Anglo-Celtic or European ethnocultural backgrounds. Among immigrants, tensions can arise as the result of differences between the internalized culture acquired during socialization and the current cultural environment. Desires for greater autonomy and self-reliance, arising from the values of the host society, may conflict with fears of separation from the group, arising from socialization experiences (Vaidyanathan & Naidoo, 1991; Dion & Dion, 1996). Thus, Dion and Dion (1996) advocate distinguishing psychological individualism/collectivism at the personal level from this dimension at the societal one.

Within any given society there will be individual differences in individualism/collectivism, and this can readily lead to differences between the ways in which partners view their relationship. Using self-actualization as a personality dimension that reflects individualism, Dion and Dion (1996) found that self-actualized people seemed to enjoy the experience of being in love more than did their less self-actualized peers, but the latter seemed to care more for their partners. In other studies, psychological individualists were found to be more likely to view "love as a game" and to have a less positive attitude toward marriage (Dion &

Dion, 1996). Thus, differences in the self-concept, arising from early socialization in the culture of rearing, affect behavior in relationships, and discrepant attitudes arising from differences in culturally influenced values may require us to make a distinction between *A*'s relationship with *B* and *B*'s relationship with *A*.

### **Integrating Explanations for Relational Phenomena by Using the Self-Concept: Two Examples**

We do not wish to overemphasize the utility of the self-concept in explaining aspects of the dynamics of relationships. However, the above considerations do suggest that studies of relationships can profit from considering the self-concepts of the participants, and how they affect and are affected by interactional behavior.

A further issue concerns the need for integration in research on personal relationships. Studies have used diverse techniques, and a number of theoretical frameworks. The diversity of approaches has led to numerous instances of different but not necessarily incompatible explanations for the same phenomenon. In some such cases different explanations may be suitable for different instances or circumstances, but in other cases reformulation of the explanation in terms of the self-concept may ameliorate the confusion.

As one example of the need for integration, many explanations have been given for the finding that partners tend to be similar in many respects, but especially in attitudes or personality (e.g., Byrne, 1971, 1997). We are concerned here not with the validity or range of applicability of these explanations (for review, see Hinde, 1997), but would emphasize that the self-concept is a common factor in many of them.<sup>3</sup> The following examples may be mentioned.

(a) Social pressure or social norms often require choice of a similar partner. The

sources of such norms are complex, but they involve the relations between the self-concepts (or self-systems) of individuals growing up and identifying with the group or groups in which they are living and incorporating the norms and values of those groups into their own self-concepts.

- (b) Priority preferential pairing. The suggestion here is that the more attractive individuals pair off first, thereby removing themselves from the pool of possible partners, and so on. This implies that individuals who see themselves as attractive seek out another whom they see as comparable to themselves.
- (c) Similarity *faute de mieux*. This implies that "like associates with like" not out of preference for someone like themselves but because each assumes that the costs of obtaining anyone better would be too great. In other words, this process involves comparison between the self-concept and the perceived qualities of the other.
- (d) Acquisition of similarity. Similarity in attitudes or personality could be the consequence rather than the cause of the association. As we have seen, the formation of a close relationship can be viewed as the merging of two selves: In the process the self-concept of each individual embraces and thus becomes more similar to that of the other.
- (e) Similarity per se is reinforcing. A number of possible mechanisms have been suggested. Similarity could foster communication or minimize tension; for instance, norms and values incorporated in the self-concepts (or self-systems) of the partners would be similar and ease the course of communication. As another possibility, similarity could provide confirmation of the values incorporated in the self-concepts of the two individuals. As Byrne (1971, 1997) has stressed, the important issue is the meaning attached to the similar-

3. Similarity consequent upon propinquity or inherited predispositions is not considered.

ity. An important distinction here is between individuals who claim that their actions depend on their own inner feelings and attitudes (low self-monitors) and those who believe their actions are determined largely by the environment (high self-monitors) (Snyder, 1979). For high self-monitors, *activity similarity* has been found to be more important than *attitude similarity*, but for low self-monitors the opposite is the case or attraction is based on general feelings of liking. Low self-monitors attempt to display what they see as their own selves in every situation (Jamieson, Lydon, & Zanna, 1987; Snyder, Gangestad & Simpson, 1983; Snyder & Simpson, 1984).<sup>4</sup>

- (f) Similarity and self-esteem. In general, self-esteem may be enhanced by a partner who is seen to be similar because the similarity is viewed as supporting the individual's own views. As noted already, self-esteem may be enhanced in a relationship if the partner shines in activities that are not self-defining for the individual concerned, who can thus bask in the partner's glory. But if the partner is involved in activities that are self-defining for the individual, the latter is likely to associate with someone who does less well or equally well to her or himself (Tesser, 1988; see also Rosenberg, 1988).
- (g) Similarity and being liked. Someone who saw her/himself as similar to another would be more likely to be attracted to that person than to someone whose self-concept was very different.
- (h) Similarity and role satisfaction. It has been suggested that the extent to which

an individual finds role satisfaction with another perceived as similar to, or different from, oneself will depend on the individual's self-concept. Individuals with high self-esteem will choose others like themselves; those with low self-esteem will choose someone different. Thus again, the role of similarity in attraction is mediated by the self-concept.

To repeat, we are not concerned here with the validity of these explanations, but we wish only to point out their relation to the self-concept.

As another example of diverse explanations for a common phenomenon, consider the fact that individuals like to do positive things for those whom they love—a fact related to the finding that the investment made in a relationship is related to commitment and continuity (Lund, 1985; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). A folk psychology view would be that, of course, one wants to please those whom one loves, and that one naturally wants to make a loved one happy. This has an element of circularity—would you call it love if you did not want to make the partner happy? However, here again a variety of possible mechanisms can be seen as mediated by the self-concept:

- (a) Aron and Aron's (1986) depiction of a loving relationship as including the other in the self provides an immediately appealing explanation; by pleasing the other you are in fact pleasing the self.
- (b) *Exchange theories* argue that one makes sacrifices in the hope of future gains, or to maintain the relationship so as not to lose one's investment in it. But what is the future gain that is anticipated? Often it is a relationship that permits the creation or maintenance of congruency in the self-concept—a relationship that can confirm one's view of oneself as a loving person, a powerful person, a kind person, or whatever the case may be.

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4. This dimension is also related to other aspects of interpersonal behavior. High self-monitor students, as compared with low self-monitors, are attracted to the external characteristics rather than psychological characteristics of others; are more promiscuous in their sexual relations; and are more ready to have sexual relations with someone to whom they are not psychologically close (Snyder, Simpson, & Gangestad, 1986).

- (c) *Interdependence theory* (e.g., Kelley, 1979) takes a step further by stressing that successful interaction must involve the continuity of the relationship, and thus the continued satisfaction of both partners. In other words, each must try to bring about congruency for the partner's self-concept as well as his or her own.
- (d) In a modification of exchange theory, *resource theory*, Foa and Foa (1974) point out that the various resources exchanged in relationships have different properties. If *A* gives *B* some money, *A* has that much less. However, if *A* gives *B* love, *A* has more (or at least feels her or himself to have more). Such a view is of course compatible with the proposition that loving involves including the other in the self, for one is in fact giving love to part of oneself. Another mechanism compatible with resource theory would be as follows. If *A* gives *B* money in a prearranged deal. *A* may see himself as having made a good investment, in which case he sees himself as wise or crafty, perhaps thereby confirming a self-concept, and thus looks for appropriate returns. Alternatively, *A* may be confirming a self-concept of himself as altruistic, in which case the giving is its own reward and no further gift is called for even if resources are available. In either case the self-concept is affected. But if *A* gives *B* love, *A* sees himself as a loving person. If there is the least doubt that reciprocation will be forthcoming (and that is at least sometimes the case), this self-concept will need confirmation. Reciprocation can be made more likely and congruency can be achieved if *A* gives more love.
- (e) Sacrifice on behalf of one whom one loves may be related to social norms. These norms usually prescribe that one should be willing to incur costs in close relationships, and this is the more so the closer the relationship. If one sees oneself as a person who conforms to social norms, one likes oneself if one sees oneself as doing so.
- (f) *Balance theory* also provides a perspective here. One likes to perceive oneself positively. If one gives something (or some time) valued by both to another whom one loves, that person's view of oneself is likely to be enhanced as a consequence. The evidence indicates that both the other's esteem, and congruency of the other's evaluation of oneself with one's own self-opinion, augment liking of the other (Deutsch & Solomon, 1959).
- (g) If a person gives to someone whom he or she likes, it usually seems that the giving is due to the liking, but it may also be the case that the liking is due to the giving. The person may want to see the other as desirable because it is in harmony with his or her own self-concept that he or she should love someone who is worthy of his or her efforts (Murray & Holmes, 1996).
- (h) An alternative theoretical approach to the link between sacrifice and love involves seeing two people in a relationship as a two-person group. A group member likes and is more willing to help a fellow group member than an outsider (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). But group membership implies that one's self-concept (or self-system) includes being a member of that group. Once again, the self-concept is involved.

## Conclusion

The study of relationships burgeoned when it was accepted that relationships had properties additional to those of individual-level behavior, and should thus be studied as entities in their own right. However, we support the view that full understanding of relationships requires a focus not only at the relationship level but also at the individual level, with the participants being treated more or less independently of each other. Analysis leads from relationships to interactions, and to understand interactions it is necessary to understand the relations between behavior and the self-concept. The

formation of, and changes in, a relationship involve changes to the self-concepts (or self-systems) of the participants (and vice versa). Most of the properties of relationships refer ultimately to self-concepts of the participants. Moreover, many relationship-level phenomena can be partly explained by reference to the self-concept.

Understanding of any phenomenon requires analysis and then resynthesis of the products of analysis. Analyzing relationships through interactions to effects on, and influences of, the self-concept will permit a resynthesis that will provide a deeper and more coherent understanding of relationships, and one that will be more available to clinicians.

Of course, the self-concept is a complex and subtle concept. Although a person's self-concept can be investigated by the simple and apparently objective technique of asking for a self-description, much fuzziness remains. For instance, how much detail is required? Under what range of circumstances should the description be elicited? It certainly cannot be said that the self-concept has sufficiently hard edges to answer such questions definitively. That, however, does not mean that aspects of how individuals see themselves cannot be used more extensively as objective data. The preceding discussion indicates that use of the self-concept may prove to have great value

in integrating (a) the several phenomenological characteristics of relationships and pointing to the relations between them; (b) the intervening variables used in the study of relationships and pointing to their interrelations, and (c) different explanations for the same relationship phenomena.

If this is the case, two (often unspoken) assumptions made by many workers in the study of relationships will require revision. First, though the emphasis on what goes on between individuals has led to considerable progress, that emphasis may need to be coupled with an equal focus on processes within the individual participants. Of course, relationships have both individual and dyadic aspects, but such a move would be in harmony with the development of the self-concept from perceptions of how other individuals perceive one (see above), and with the mutual dialectical influences between individual behavior and relationships mentioned earlier.

Revision of the second assumption implies that in addition to the relationship between *A* and *B*, we should follow Laing (1969) and others and recognize two further relationships, *A*'s relationship with *B* and *B*'s relationship with *A*. Each of these perspectives will affect the course of the relationship, and how they do so will be influenced by how *A* and *B* see themselves.

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