Relational and Personal Self-Expansion as Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in Long-Distance Couples

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INTRODUCTION

- Living long-distance from a romantic partner can contribute to uncertainty about the relationship (e.g., Mietzner & Lin, 2005) and fears about growing apart (e.g., Arditti & Kauffman, 2004).
- However, long-distance and geographically close relationships are equivalent in many relationship qualities, such as satisfaction and stability (e.g., Dargie et al., 2015; Kelmer et al., 2013).
- An unexplored tenet of the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986) posits that broadening one’s sense of self independently of a partner (i.e., personal self-expansion) can revitalize relationships because partners learn new perspectives from each other’s experiences.
- Furthermore, feeling more confident and capable from being with a romantic partner (i.e., relational self-expansion) is associated with greater relational satisfaction (Nardone et al., 2008).
- Therefore, we predicted that self-expansion could help explain how couples maintain relational well-being while apart, and expected personal and relational self-expansion to be positively associated with couples’ relationship satisfaction.

PARTICIPANTS & PROCEDURES

- Couples (N = 193) in long-distance relationships (average 5179 km distant) completed a half-hour online survey.
- Participants were ethnically diverse (54.1% Caucasian) and averaged 24.09 years of age (SD = 5.49).
- Average relationship length was 2.33 years (SD = 1.75) and most participants were in mixed-sex relationships (94.3%).
- Reasons for long-distance: partner worked or studied elsewhere (38.9%), met while traveling or studying abroad (23.8%), one or both partners were on exchange (21.2%), met online (14.5%), military deployment (1.6%).

MEASURES

- Personal Self-Expansion: Self-concept change in six domains (e.g., cultural, recreational, social).
  
  “How much has engaging in these events or activities changed your sense of identity or how you think of yourself?”

- Relational Self-Expansion (Mattingly et al., 2014):
  
  “By being with my romantic partner, I have learned many great new things.”

- Relationship Satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007)
  
  “Our relationship is strong.”

RESULTS

- We tested a multi-level model with indistinguishable dyads using the actor-partner interdependence framework; estimates were pooled across partners as there were no sex differences.
- We also controlled for relationship length, distance between partners, and engagement in activities.

- We found that personal self-expansion was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (B = -0.41, p < .01).
- Personal self-expansion was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (B = 0.12, p = .04).
- Relational self-expansion was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (B = 2.03, p < .01).
- Distance was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (B = -1.96, p < .01).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

- Contrary to expectations, the more individuals felt that they had changed in meaningful ways while away from partners, the less happy they were in their relationships.
- It may be that personal self-expansion—changing in important ways while away from partners—elicits individuals’ fears about growing apart (Arditti & Kauffman, 2004), bringing about dissatisfaction with the relationship.
- There was no association between individuals’ personal self-expansion and partners’ relational satisfaction, perhaps because partners are not aware of the significance or meaning of the change experienced by individuals.
- As expected, the more individuals experienced an enriched sense of self from their partnership, the happier they and their partners were with the relationship.
- Experiencing enrichment in identity because of the partnership creates positive feelings and confidence that are associated with the partner and the relationship, which might foster feelings of closeness and happiness with the relationship for both partners.
- Contrary to the self-expansion model, it may be that relational self-expansion benefits long-distance couples’ relationships by creating closeness but personal self-expansion distress partners by creating distance and a sense that they no longer know each other intimately.