

CHAPTER THREE

**Competition in Romantic Relationships:  
Do Partners Build Niches?**

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Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue compellingly that human beings have a need to belong, and that this need may be deeply rooted in the experience of homo sapiens in their Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EEA). For humans, the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness is commonly taken to be the Pleistocene environment in which the overwhelming majority of human evolution is thought to have occurred. The need to belong to a group may, however, be only the most basic of the adaptations that emerged during the EEA for humans. It seems likely that a variety of other social adaptations have developed as well, and that these serve to further the goal of maintaining or optimizing group involvement and pair bonding.

Leary and Downs (1995) note, for example, that evaluative feelings about the self may serve as a social adaptation "that (1) monitors the social environment for cues indicating disapproval, rejection, or exclusion and (2) alerts the individual via negative affective reactions when such cues are detected." (Leary & Downs, 1995, p. 129). Gilbert (1992) also hypothesizes that mechanisms to enhance smooth functioning within a group or dyadic context may have assumed increasing evolutionary importance as homo sapiens became more oriented to alliances and sharing. Gilbert (1992) highlights the emergence of strategies to gain and control others' attention through coalitions and cooperative activity, rather than exclusive reliance on strategies to attain dominance

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via threat and aggression. Likewise, Kirkpatrick (1998) notes that humans may have benefited from a mechanism that helped foster commitment in newly forming couples, and so helped free partners from an otherwise potentially interminable mate selection process. As these examples suggest, a number of perspectives highlight a role for selective pressure in the emergence of mechanisms to regulate dyadic interaction. In particular, these arguments suggest selective pressure favoring social adaptations designed to regulate competition, focus efforts to better "fit" with close others, and to facilitate the formation of (at least moderately) stable pair bonds.

### A Mechanism to Facilitate Cooperation, Fit, and Pair Bonding?

The Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model (Tesser, 1988) describes a mechanism that seems well designed to guide the development of a mental representation that could, in turn, help regulate competition, focus efforts to fit with a partner, and so facilitate pair bonding. According to the SEM model (Tesser, 1988), when the self performs better than close others in a given area, that area tends to remain central or "relevant" to one's self-definition. Conversely, performing relatively more poorly than close others is often associated with decreases in self-relevance (Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1982; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983), a process that may be reflected in rating the area as less important to the self.

How might this simple mechanism serve to construct a "self" that fits better with the partner and so facilitates pair bonding? We hypothesize that shifts in relevance provide a basis for partners in close relationships to change their views of themselves over time, and to do so in a manner that leads them to "cede" certain areas to the partner, while retaining decision-making or leadership authority in others. When one partner notices that the other consistently performs better in a certain area, this information will tend to result in that area being represented as less "self-relevant." The decrease in self-relevance should correspond to a tendency to defer to the partner and play a supportive role in the area. For example, if one partner has a better memory for directions, the partner should be more likely to defer to their suggestions about which way to go.

Indeed, because decreased relevance should also make it more likely that the individual will "bask in the reflected glory" of the other's

good performance (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), this shift should help partners feel good about deferring to the other. As partners increasingly sort out areas in which one or the other will take the lead (and areas in which it is fine for both to participate or even to compete), there should be substantial benefit in terms of coordination of effort. Rather than working at cross purposes or against one another, partners should be able to work more easily toward a common end. In addition, as partners feel increasingly good about each other's areas of strength, it should be easier to reinforce each other's strengths, and so provide encouragement and support.

Accordingly, the process of decreasing self-relevance in response to being outperformed by a close other should be particularly useful in regulating competition and increasing perceived fit with a close other, if it provides an occasion for the self to cede leadership in some areas while retaining leadership in other areas. It is important to note, however, that an area has only been ceded to the partner if it is viewed as more important to the partner than to the self. If the importance of the area is reduced both for the self and the partner, the resulting mental representation provides no additional guidance as to who should take the lead in that area or who should be expected to do better in that area. Accordingly, decreasing importance for both self and partner should not facilitate cooperation, or increase perceived fit with the partner. Rather, for relevance adjustments to have value as a social adaptation, self-relevance should *diverge* from partner-relevance when the self is outperformed. Because it has no parameter of partner-relevance, the original SEM model (Tesser, 1988) did not adequately deal with the issue of divergence of self and partner-relevance, and so did not adequately explicate the potentially adaptive implications of change in relevance for dyadic competition and cooperation. We provide a brief discussion of the potential adaptive problem posed by the attraction to similar others, as well as evidence that partners may build complementarity into their relationships in the following section. Doing so sets the stage for predictions regarding circumstances under which the relevance of an area to self and partner should diverge.

### Similarity is a Potential Problem for Romantic Relationships

Similarity is well known to be attractive and to provide a foundation for assortative mating (for example, Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Byrne,

1997; O'Leary & Smith, 1991). However, similarity may also lead others to display abilities similar to one's own, creating a potential threat to self-evaluation and to cooperative interaction. In this context, an age-old cliché becomes an important question: If "birds of a feather flock together" how do they stay together? That is, if similarity brings people together, how do they deal with the problems created by their similarity? To solve the problem of similarity, couples may often revise self-relevance in relation to perceived partner-relevance, to create a "performance ecology" (Beach, Tesser, Mendolia, Anderson, Crelia, Whitaker, & Fincham, 1996) in which self and partner-relevance diverge.

A performance ecology is, simply, a cognitive-relational structure that maps out each partner's performance "niche" in the relationship. That is, a performance ecology maps out the performance areas in which the self is better and has a leadership role, areas that can be safely shared, and areas that are important to neither partner. As noted earlier, the original SEM model did not address the question of divergence of self and partner-relevance. When extended to marriage, the SEM model (Beach & Tesser, 1995) implies divergence of self and partner-relevance in response to performance feedback, due to sympathetic concern for partner outcomes. Thus, this model provides a theoretical basis for the prediction of divergence in committed dyads.

However, the extended model is silent with regard to divergence in less-committed dyads. Less-committed couples are of considerable interest, if one considers relevance adjustments to be an adaptation designed to help couples create better "fit" to a particular partner, or to foster commitment to the relationship. In this case, one might anticipate that divergence would occur relatively early in the couple formation process, and not only after couples were already committed. Likewise, if shifts in relevance have the function of ceasing performance areas to others, such an activity would seem particularly important early in the process of pair bonding, when couple identity is being shaped. Accordingly, a mechanism prompting divergence in self and partner-relevance that does not depend entirely on concern for partner outcomes, would also seem to have important adaptive benefits. Of course these hypotheses assume that, under some circumstances, divergence in self and partner-relevance is helpful to couples.

### Is Divergence of Self-Relevance and Perceived Partner-Relevance Helpful?

Several lines of evidence suggest the possibility that divergence in self and partner-relevance may be useful in romantic relationships. Working within the framework of the SEM model, Beach and Tesser (1993) examined differentiation in the area of decision making, and related this differentiation to marital satisfaction. Husbands and wives who made decisions in areas of greater personal importance were more satisfied with their marriages. Interestingly, this effect was not due to these spouses having more power; it was due to differentiation and the differentiated use of power. That is, relative to less-satisfied partners, satisfied husbands and wives reported a higher percentage of agreements in areas conferring potential SEM benefits. If the self made the decision about "where to live" and this issue was important to the self, or if the partner made the decision about "where to live" and this issue was not important to the self, there were high percentages of perceived agreement among the satisfied couples. In contrast, this pattern was less true for dissatisfied partners.

Similarly, satisfied husbands and wives reported a higher percentage of agreements when the self made the decision and the area was unimportant to the partner, or the partner made the decision and the area was unimportant to the self. Again, this pattern was less true for dissatisfied partners. However, when we examined overall level of perceived decision-making power in the relationship (regardless of importance to self or partner), overall decision-making power did not strongly discriminate between those in more- and less-satisfied relationships. Accordingly, it appears that satisfaction is related most strongly to the patterning of decision making, and its fit with the niches that have been created by each partner in the relationship.

Evidence that complementarity may be useful in enhancing relationship outcomes also comes from work outside the SEM tradition. For example, Fitzpatrick's work (1988) on relationship "types" suggests three types of couples: independents, separates, and traditionals. Although independents are often viewed as an ideal example of well functioning spouses (they appear to be supportive of each other, able to deal directly with conflict, and egalitarian in their orientation to marriage), they were *not* the group Fitzpatrick found to be most maritally satisfied. They were more satisfied than separates, who displayed a particularly low level

of teamwork and "we-ness," but not as satisfied as traditionals, who reported having a very clear and distinct division of labor in the marriage and separate spheres of influence. Traditionals also reported the most time together, the most shared activities, and the most physical proximity over the course of the day. The traditional group was best differentiated and most complementary with regard to the performance domain, and regardless of the index of closeness one might use, they were also the group reporting the greatest degree of closeness.

Extending and expanding this line of reasoning to a younger population, the power of similarity and complementarity to predict relationship outcomes in dating relationships was examined by Houts, Robins, and Huston (1996) for 168 first-time marriages. They found evidence of assortative mating with regard to many social characteristics, but little evidence that such similarity predicted courtship evaluations. However, both similarity in leisure interests and complementarity in role preferences (that is, agreeing about who would take which roles) were related to positive evaluation of the relationship, and lower levels of conflict. Again, these data are correlational, but suggest the importance, for dating partners, of divergence with regard to role preferences.

Of equal interest, however, is the observation by Houts et al. (1996) that, even in a relatively homogeneous population, it is quite difficult to find a partner who is compatible with the self on multiple leisure and role performance domains. Accordingly, regardless of how well partners choose each other, there are likely to be many points of potential friction that await them as they attempt to create a workable division of labor. Accordingly, these data underscore the potential utility of a mechanism that could lead to greater complementarity of role preferences.

#### *Adjustment when the Self is Outperformed*

When the self is outperformed, individuals should be threatened with the possibility of negative comparison, and so be motivated to protect self-evaluation by decreasing the self-relevance of the area (especially if performance can not be distorted, and closeness is not free to change easily). This prediction follows directly from the SEM model (Tesser, 1988). Of interest in the current series of studies is what happens to self-relevance in relation to perceived partner-relevance. Do both types of relevance ratings change together, suggesting a "sour grapes" response to being outperformed? Or, as predicted by the current

elaboration of the SEM model, is the reduction in self-relevance coupled with a divergence in self and partner-relevance ratings? Only the latter result is consistent with the hypothesis that SEM adjustments have the function of "ceding" the area to the partner, thereby fostering cooperation, enhanced fit, and pair bonding.

#### *Adjustment when the Self Performs Better*

When the self performs better, there is no threat to self-evaluation and hence no self-defensive motivation to adjust relevance. Accordingly, from the perspective of the original SEM model, there is little reason to expect divergence between self and partner-relevance. In contrast, the extended SEM model (Beach & Tesser, 1995) suggests that increased empathy and attention to partner reactions could motivate relevance adjustment, resulting in divergence when the self performs better. At least one earlier study supports the hypothesis that partners sometimes adjust partner-relevance to create greater divergence between self and partner-relevance. In a study of decision making among married partners, Beach et al. (1996, Study 3) found that spouses tended to overestimate partner-relevance for areas in which the spouse made the decision, but underestimate partner-relevance for areas in which the self made the decision. That is, we asked both partners in the marriage to say how important various areas of decision making were to them and to their partner. In this way, we could compare partners' perceptions with the reality of the other's stated importance of the area. We found that, when individuals had greater decision authority in the area, their spouses perceived the area as more important to them than their self-report indicated it really was. In contrast, when individuals had less decision authority in an area, spouses perceived the area as less important to them than their self-report indicated it was.

#### *Highlighting Competition to Amplify Adjustments*

If the adjustments in perceived relevance that follow differential performance feedback are made in the service of promoting cooperative interaction with the partner, the process should be intensified by highlighting potential competition with the partner. That is, one might expect potentially competitive interactions to lead to greater divergence of relevance ratings in response to differential performance feedback. This possibility contrasts with the hypothesis that competition will simply confer extra significance on performing well for both self and partner, leading to greater relevance ratings for both self and partner

(particularly if the self performs better), and quite possibly blocking divergence in relevance ratings. It also contrasts with the prediction that potential competition with a close other may prompt a defensive reduction in relevance ratings for both self and partner (particularly if the partner performs better), again blocking divergence. If highlighting the competitive nature of an activity blocks the divergence of self and partner-relevance ratings by causing the ratings to move up or down together, the hypothesis that divergence is designed to defuse competition would be thrown into doubt. Accordingly, examining divergence in self and partner-relevance ratings in the context of an explicitly competitive task represents a critical test of relevance adjustments as social adaptations.

### *Hypotheses and Overview of Studies*<sup>1</sup>

We conducted a series of three studies of dating and married couples, to examine the possibility that self and partner-relevance may diverge in response to performance feedback. Specifically, we tested three inter-related hypotheses.

1. In Study 1 (a study of dating couples), self-relevance will diverge from perceived partner-relevance in response to feedback that the partner has outperformed the self. In Study 1 and in both subsequent studies, this "self-defensive" effect will appear as the interaction of level of "Performance" (Self better versus Other better) with "Target" (Self versus Partner); that is, self-relevance will be significantly lower than partner-relevance in the "Other-better" performance condition.
2. In Study 2, using married couples, self-relevance will diverge from perceived partner-relevance both in response to feedback that the partner has outperformed the self and in response to feedback that the self has outperformed the partner. Adjustments will be examined by testing the significance of the simple effects of Target within level of Performance.
3. In Study 3 (again using dating couples), we predicted that divergence in relevance ratings would be amplified if the competitive

<sup>1</sup> A manipulation of cognitive load was present in each of the studies. However, it failed to interact with Performance Feedback in any of the studies, indicating that adjustments in response to self-better feedback and adjustments in response to partner-better feedback were not differentially disrupted. Accordingly, we mention briefly the cognitive load manipulation where appropriate, but avoid claims affirming the null hypothesis.

nature of the task were highlighted. Specifically, the interaction of "Performance" by "Target" should be significant, and in the direction predicted for Study 1. As in Study 1, self-relevance should be significantly lower than partner-relevance in the "Other-better" condition. A comparison of Studies 1 and 3 should indicate a greater impact of performance information on divergence in Study 3.

### STUDY 1

Do persons in romantic relationships shift the relative importance of performance domains in response to differential performance feedback? Do adjustments of self-relevance result in *divergence* of self and perceived partner-relevance, or merely cause them to move in tandem? To address these questions, it was necessary to create a context in which credible performance feedback could be provided, and in which partners could be asked to rate the importance of various areas. Accordingly, we developed a paradigm that met this requirement and that was used throughout the following series of studies. Couples were recruited and asked to participate in a task that would "help psychologists refine a newly developed test that was diagnostic of several important abilities." In each case, participants found the cover story credible and seemed involved in the activities. Study 1 is therefore an initial test of the first hypothesis, as well as a test of the utility of the experimental paradigm for use in later studies.

Participants were 48 dating couples from a large southeastern university. Participants included both psychology undergraduates recruited from the subject pool and their partners, and couples recruited from signs posted around the campus. Psychology students received partial credit and a \$5 payment for their partners in return for their participation, whereas the latter group, in which neither partner received credit, was given \$10 for their participation. Participants had a mean age of 19.1 years (range 18–24 years) and had been dating for 12.5 months on average (range 1–61 months). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four between-subject conditions created by crossing Performance (Self-better versus Other-better) and Cognitive load (High versus Low).

Participants were introduced to the study and told that their participation would help in the development of a diagnostic task that related to various important abilities; they were informed that we were interested in whether they could discern the abilities measured by

the task under various levels of cognitive "load." Couples were told that both partners would complete the same computerized task, and that, although they would be in different rooms, they would receive nearly instantaneous feedback on their performance as the computers on which they would be working were connected to the psychology department server. Ethernet connections consistent with the cover story were attached to both computers and were clearly visible to the participants. In addition, they were told they would receive a number at the end of the task to memorize and recall at a later point in time.

After being shown to their individual rooms, participants were asked to complete a 26-item, multiple-choice test that included trivia questions about "American culture." Examples of questions are as follows: "The newspaper most Americans subscribe to is the \_\_\_\_\_"; "After watching television, Americans spend the most of their time \_\_\_\_\_." After participants had completed the task, the computer displayed a message to all participants asking them to "Wait for your partner to finish." After a 15 second delay, a computer message indicated that the partner had finished and that scores were being tabulated. Both members of the dyad received the same type of feedback, either that they had scored higher than their partner had, or that their partner had scored higher than they did. Because partners did not interact regarding the feedback, assigning partners to the same feedback condition was possible, without compromising the believability of the feedback.

### Dependent Measures

Following the feedback and the presentation of a number to recall later, the key dependent measure was presented. On a six-point scale, participants were asked to rate the following questions, "To what extent did the task relate to abilities that are important to you?" And, "To what extent did the task relate to abilities that are important to your partner?" Participants then completed a series of additional questions about the task, demographic information, and several questionnaires.

### Performance and Task-relevance in Dating Couples

Due to the potential dependency in the ratings between members of a couple, the couple rather than the individual was used as the unit of analysis. Because the couple was the unit for all analyses, there were four scores for each unit: the male's self and partner-relevance ratings,

**Table 3.1. Cell Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) for Relevance Ratings as a Function of Performance Feedback and Target for Study 1**

Performance Feedback	Target	
	Self	Partner
Self better	2.92 (1.28)	2.98 (1.12)
Other better	2.56 (.824)	3.11 (1.99)
N = 47 couples		

and the female's self and partner-relevance ratings. Accordingly, the data were analyzed in a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures ANOVA with Performance and Memory Load as between-subject variables. Gender was treated as repeated within-couple, and target of the relevance ratings (Self or Other) was treated as repeated within-individual.

Our first hypothesis argues that the relevance ratings for self and partner should change differentially as a function of performance conditions, leading to divergence when the self is threatened with potential negative comparison. Providing initial support for this prediction, the Performance  $\times$  Target interaction was significant,  $F(1, 43) = 8.15$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that relevance ratings changed differentially for self and partner as a function of performance outcomes. The pattern of mean differences in relevance ratings for the self and partner was consistent with the hypothesized "self-defensive" process only. That is, the simple main effect of target was significant within the "Other-better" condition  $F(1, 18) = 6.91$ ,  $p = .01$  ( $M_s = 2.56$  and  $3.11$  for self and perceived partner-relevance, respectively), but not within the "Self-better" condition ( $M_s = 2.92$  and  $2.98$  for self and perceived partner-relevance, respectively). See Table 3.1.

### Implications

Consistent with the first hypothesis, the current findings suggest that, when outperformed by the partner, dating partners decrease self-relevance relative to partner-relevance. It should be noted that this result is not the only possible pattern. One might have hypothesized a "sour grapes" pattern, in which relevance would be rated lower for both the self and the partner if the self were to be outperformed. Or, one

might have hypothesized that couples would protect their "similarity" to the partner, eschewing the opportunity to create divergence in relevance ratings within the dyad, and leaving relevance ratings relatively high for both partners. Accordingly, these findings provide initial support for the notion that the relevance adjustments predicted by the SEM model serve to create divergence in self and partner ratings, and that the adjustments have the effect of "ceding" certain areas to the partner.

At the same time, Study 1 provided no evidence that self-relevance diverged from partner-relevance when the self did better. Of course, because outperforming the partner poses no threat of negative comparison, there was little reason to expect divergence in relevance ratings when the self did better. However, as relationships develop, partners may become more sensitive to the ways in which outperforming the partner affects the partner or the relationship. Consideration of possible partner outcomes may lead to relative decreases in perceived partner-relevance (for example, Beach et al., 1996), or norms of reciprocity and greater comfort with the partner may lead to relative increases in the assertion of self-relevance for areas in which the self performs better. In either case, one might expect more established couples to provide more evidence of divergence in response to the "self outperforms partner" condition.

## STUDY 2<sup>2</sup>

Study 2 replicates and extends the findings from Study 1 to a married sample. Married couples have a more communal relationship with each other (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986), may expect greater reciprocity and fairness in their relationships, and may be more sensitive to partner and relationship outcomes. This situation may lead married couples to show adjustment of self and partner relevance in response to outperforming the partner, as well as showing the self-defensive adjustments found in Study 1.

In addition to examining self-defensive adjustments and adjustments in response to outperforming the partner, comparison of Study 2 results with those from Study 1 provides a window on differences between dating and married couples. In particular, the comparison of Study 1 and Study 2 allows us to directly examine the hypothesis that adjustments in

response to outperforming the partner may differ significantly between dating and married couples. It should be noted, however, that differences between dating and married couples are potentially confounded with other factors that vary between the two studies, such as the experimenter running the study and the method of recruitment. Likewise, the two samples differ with regard to age, and age may influence degree of empathy and concern for others' outcomes. Nonetheless, comparison of the two samples using the same experimental procedure provides a basis for speculating about patterns of adjusting to differential performance feedback that may change as couples move from one stage of relationship development to another.

Participants were 43 married couples recruited from the county surrounding and including the University of Georgia. Participants were recruited through random digit dialing performed by the Survey Research Center at the Institute for Behavioral Research at the University of Georgia. Participants averaged 36.9 years of age (range 21–68 years) and had been married for 10.3 years on average (range 1–47 years). As in Study 1, couples were randomly assigned to one of the four between-subject conditions crossing Performance and Load.

The procedure was identical to that used in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to performance condition. They received feedback that they had either outperformed the partner or that the partner had outperformed the self. Following the feedback, participants were asked to rate task-relevance for the self and for the partner, and then completed additional measures.

### Performance and Task-Relevance in Married Couples

As in Study 1, we conducted a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures ANOVA with Performance and Cognitive Load treated as between-subject factors, Target of the relevance rating treated as a within-subject variable, and gender treated as repeated within-couple. Replicating the findings of Study 1, the Performance  $\times$  Target interaction was significant,  $F(1, 39) = 24.49, p = .0001$ , indicating that relevance ratings diverged in response to differential performance feedback. To test for "self-defensive" adjustments and adjustments in response to outperforming the partner, simple effects within level of Performance were examined. As in Study 1, there was a significant simple effect of Target when the partner outperformed the self,  $F(1, 21) = 19.30, p < .01$ , showing that partner-relevance was rated as significantly greater than self-relevance in this condition. See Table 3.2. This result indicates that the

<sup>2</sup> Results of Study 2 are reported in more detail in: Beach, S. R. H., Whitaker, D., Jones, D., & Tesser, A. (in press). When does performance feedback prompt complementarity in romantic relationships? *Personal Relationships*.

**Table 3.2. Cell Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) for Relevance Ratings as a Function of Performance Feedback and Target for Study 2**

Performance Feedback	Target of Relevance Ratings	
	Self	Partner
Self better	3.5 (1.29)	3.125 (1.07)
Other better	2.72 (.954)	3.37 (1.20)
N = 43 couples		

self-defensive pattern of adjustment found in dating couples was found for married couples as well. In addition, the simple main effect of Target was significant when the self outperformed the partner,  $F(1,18) = 6.91$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that ratings of self-relevance were significantly greater than ratings of partner-relevance. This finding supports Hypothesis 2 that married couples would show evidence of divergence in relevance ratings, both in response to being outperformed by the partner and in response to outperforming the partner.

#### From Dating to Marriage: Comparison of Study 1 and Study 2

Although Study 2 showed significant adjustments in response to outperforming the partner, and Study 1 did not, this finding does not ensure that this effect was significantly greater in Study 2 than in Study 1. In addition, if adjustments are greater among married couples in response to being outperformed as well as outperforming the partner, this finding would lead to a different interpretation than if only one of the processes appeared stronger. For example, if *both* processes seemed more extreme for the married couples, one might assume that they used the response scale differently. Accordingly, to directly test the hypothesis that dating and married partners differed in the magnitude of their adjustments in response to outperforming the partner, the data from Studies 1 and 2 were combined, and "Study" was added as an additional between-subject factor. Because level of Memory Load did not interact with Performance Feedback in either study, it was dropped as a factor in these analyses.

A significant main effect of Target and a significant interaction of Target and Performance were found. These findings indicate that relevance to partner was rated slightly higher than relevance to self

overall, and that divergence between self and partner-relevance occurred in response to performance feedback in both studies. Because they were discussed previously, these effects are not mentioned further. In addition, there was a significant three-way interaction of Performance, Target, and Study,  $F(1,86) = 3.94$ ,  $p = .05$ . To examine whether this finding resulted from between-study differences in adjustments to outperforming the partner, or differences in self-defensive adjustments, or both, simple interaction effects within level of Performance were examined. When the self outperformed the partner, there was a significant interaction of Study and Target,  $F(1,43) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating significantly greater divergence of self and partner-relevance in the married sample than in the dating sample. As predicted, there was no significant interaction of Target and Study within the "Partner-Better" condition.

#### Implications

The results of Study 2 replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 to a sample of married couples recruited from the community. In both studies, there was evidence of divergence between self-relevance and partner-relevance ratings when the partner outperformed the self. In Study 2, however, divergence in self and partner-relevance ratings *also* occurred when the self outperformed the partner. Further, although one must be cautious about cross-study comparisons, it appears that the divergence in response to doing better than the partner was greater among married couples than among dating couples. At a general level, this finding may indicate greater concern on the part of married couples regarding the reactions of the partner. Alternatively, it may suggest that married couples are more willing to divide performance domains into those that are self-relevant and those that are partner-relevant, and to "claim" as well as to "cede" areas in response to differential performance feedback. In either case, the results are consistent with a larger literature suggesting that married couples are more attuned to partner and relational outcomes (for example, Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Mills & Clark, 1982; Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996), and so may show patterns of adjustment to the partner that go beyond resolving direct threats to self-evaluation.

#### STUDY 3

Adjusting relevance in a manner that cedes an area to the partner (or claims it for the self) makes most sense when one person can or should

handle the area, rather than when multiple persons might or should all engage in the same behavior regardless of skill. That is, divergence in self and partner-relevance should be more pronounced for an area perceived to be a potential source of competition within the dyad, than for an area in which competition is perceived to be unlikely (for example, joint projects). Highlighting the fact that the members of the dyad are engaged in a "competition" should therefore intensify divergence of self and partner-relevance.

Alternatively, one might expect that highlighting competition would lead both partners to invest some additional significance to the task, making it more difficult for them to adjust relevance downward for self or for partner. From this perspective, even though participants are told that the test is designed to help psychologists assess several important abilities, it is possible that participants are more willing to cede the area to their partner precisely because they are not engaged in a competition with their partner. Thus, the previously observed pattern of divergence in self and partner-relevance in response to feedback that the partner outperformed the self might be eliminated if the task were more inviting of a competitive set. If so, this finding would be strongly disconfirming of the hypothesis that relevance adjustments are adaptive because they help manage competitive tensions.

Participants were 56 dating couples recruited through the psychology department research pool. Participants received research credit and partners received payment for their participation. Couples were similar in age to those in Study 1. On average, they were 19.91 years old (range 18–26) and reported that they had been dating for an average of 19.88 months (range 3–62).

The procedure was identical to that in Study 1, with two exceptions. First, for the Cognitive Load manipulation, participants were told they would be asked to recall their assigned number on two occasions rather than on just one occasion. Second, couples were told they would be "competing" against their partner on a new diagnostic test that related to important abilities. To underscore that they were in competition with their partner, the experimenter emphasized the importance of starting at the same time, and started the task by saying "Ready, set, go."

### Performance and Relevance when Competition is Highlighted

As in Study 1, we conducted a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures ANOVA with Performance and Load treated as between-subject variables, Target

**Table 3.3. Cell Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) for Relevance Ratings as a Function of Performance Feedback for Study 3**

Performance Feedback	Target	
	Self	Partner
Self better	3.11 (1.00)	2.98 (1.09)
Other better	2.71 (1.00)	3.50 (.91)
N = 56 couples		

of the relevance rating repeated within-individual, and gender repeated within-couple. There were two significant effects. First, there was a significant main effect of Target  $F(1,51) = 20.11, p < .001$ , indicating that average ratings of relevance to self were lower than ratings of relevance to partner. However, this effect must be interpreted in the context of the predicted interaction of Target by Performance,  $F(1,51) = 37.94, p < .001$ . Follow-up analyses within level of Performance indicated that the effect of Target was not significant when the self outperformed the partner ( $M_s = 3.11$  and  $2.98$  for self and perceived partner-relevance, respectively), but was significant when the partner outperformed the self,  $F(1,26) = 58.53, p < .001$ ; in the latter condition, relevance to self ( $M = 2.71$ ) was rated significantly lower than relevance to partner ( $M = 3.50$ ). See Table 3.3.

Accordingly, Study 3 replicated Study 1 both in finding divergence in response to feedback that the self had been outperformed, and in *failing* to find divergence in response to feedback that the self performed better than the partner. This finding indicates that an emphasis on competition did not prevent divergence in self and partner ratings of relevance. Indeed, comparison of the means in Studies 1 and 3 suggests that the "self-protective" effect was larger in Study 3 than in Study 1.

### Does Competition Matter?

To examine whether the "competition" manipulation significantly increased the self-defensive reaction of dating partners, data from Study 1 and Study 3 were combined, and "Study" was added as an additional between-subject factor. Memory Load did not interact with Performance in either study, and so it was dropped as a factor in the analyses.

It should be noted again that "Study" may be confounded with other potentially consequential variables, such as the time of year the study was run, the particular experimenters running the study, or the minor change in the "Load" manipulation. Accordingly, caution regarding interpretations of significant differences between the studies is suggested.

Three significant effects emerged in the  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures ANOVA. As was true in the separate analyses of both studies, there was a main effect of Target  $F(1,98) = 31.17, p < .001$ , and a significant interaction of Performance by Target  $F(1,99) = 38.43, p < .001$ . In addition, there was a marginal interaction of Target by Performance and Study  $F(1,98) = 3.62, p = .06$ , indicating that the interaction of Performance and Target was marginally stronger in Study 3 ( $F = 37.94$ ) than in Study 1 ( $F = 8.15$ ). However, follow-up analyses within level of Performance did not indicate a significant interaction of Target with Study within either level of Performance feedback.

### Implications

The results of Study 3 replicate the finding that dating couples show divergence in self and partner-relevance in response to being outperformed, but not in response to outperforming the partner. Making competition salient did not block divergence of self and partner-relevance in response to differential performance feedback. Nor did encouraging partners to view each other as competitors result in any dampening of the tendency to show divergence in relevance ratings in response to being outperformed.

A comparison of Studies 1 and 3 suggests, however, that when dating couples are instructed to view themselves as being in potential competition with one another, self and partner ratings diverge somewhat more. If one viewed the competition manipulation as simply accentuating the importance of the task, one might have predicted increased relevance ratings for both self and partner. Alternatively, if one viewed the competition manipulation as increasing relevance to the self and making it more difficult to change relevance, one might have predicted more intense affective responding, but no greater change in relevance in response to feedback.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Interpreting Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) processes as social adaptations, and not just as self-defense mechanisms, raises new issues

about the exact nature of adjustments made by romantic partners in response to performance feedback. As a social adaptation, adjustments of relevance should help regulate social interactions. This function seems best served by adjustments that clarify who is the expert and should take the lead in a given area, suggesting that adjustments should lead to divergence in self-relevance and perceived partner-relevance. Following this logic, the current studies were designed to investigate the possibility that differential performance feedback may result in divergence between self-relevance and perceived partner-relevance. Divergence provides a mechanism for constructing adaptive complementarity in romantic and other close relationships (relationships that are otherwise strongly pulled toward similarity). In all three studies, evidence supporting the divergence hypothesis was obtained. In particular, in each of the studies, self-relevance diverged from perceived partner-relevance when the self was outperformed. That is, self-relevance was significantly lower than partner-relevance when the individual received feedback that the self had been outperformed.

The pattern of significantly lower self-relevance than partner-relevance in response to feedback that the partner had outperformed the self was labeled "self-defensive" because it occurred in response to feedback that had the potential to threaten self-evaluation. Importantly, this self-defensive pattern of adjustment led to divergence in both dating and married samples. This finding is important because it suggests that SEM adjustments may help dyads accommodate to each other's strengths and weaknesses, even at early stages of the relationship before more effortful and costly accommodations become common (for example, Rusbult et al., 1996; Rusbult, Bissonette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1999). That is, couples may start to adjust self-definition by decreasing self-relevance in areas in which the partner is performing better, and so create a better fit with a potential partner, even before they are highly committed to the particular partner. Such low-cost adjustments may also help newly forming dyads to view themselves as being a "good match," and so contribute to the idealization of partners early in the relationship. If so, such adjustments may be one of the commitment and relationship-enhancing mechanisms that allow partners to form a stable and satisfactory relationship (for example, Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995).

Finally, Study 3 provided evidence that highlighting competition is not sufficient to disrupt divergence in response to differential performance feedback. Rather, a comparison with Study 1 suggested that

highlighting competition served to intensify (marginally) self-defensive divergence among dating couples. Thus, the hypothesis that relevance adjustments may serve as a social adaptation survived a direct test.

### The Development of Performance Ecologies in Romantic Relationships

The current studies provide only a preliminary foundation for understanding the development of performance ecologies in romantic relationships. That is, these studies indicate that divergence in self and partner-relevance in response to performance feedback occurs, but do not indicate how such changes are maintained or ultimately translated into an understanding of the self in relation to the partner. Although the longevity of self and partner-relevance adjustments in the absence of other maintaining events is unknown, it seems likely that, in some cases, relevance adjustments are maintained because subsequent relationship events tend to support the initial adjustment. For example, a particular pattern of performance feedback may be received repeatedly. Or, "ceding" a performance domain to a better performing partner may be reinforced by a positive reaction from the partner, or may occasion other positive relationship consequences. These additional relationship events could lead to a stable pattern of interaction and hence become self-maintaining (cf. Kelley, 1983a, 1983b). According to this perspective, the shift in self-relevance produced by performance feedback could provide a first step, or occasion, for other dyadic processes to foster a new and stable pattern of interaction and division of labor. The subsequent changes could, in turn, lead to greater cooperation, an enhanced sense of fit with the partner, and increased satisfaction and commitment to the relationship. Of course, these developmental speculations remain untested in the current investigation.

What might the process of constructing a performance ecology look like? We propose that, following the initial attraction created by overt similarities, couples may implicitly define specific niches in which each may perform better than the partner does, and so confer unique benefits to the dyad. Negative affective consequences for the self and threats to self-evaluation should diminish as certain niches are ceded to the partner, or as the partner is perceived as having ceded certain niches to the self. Adjustments in self-relevance relative to perceived partner-relevance should be the starting point for this process. In this case, one partner is likely to gradually take over the area, with the other partner

taking a secondary role. In place of competition, some form of increased specialization and cooperation within the dyad will emerge. In some cases then, the establishment of a performance ecology may serve as a relationship maintenance strategy that eliminates potential competitive difficulties for the dyad. The divergence in self and partner-relevance that is the hallmark of a couple performance ecology should make it easier for partners to bask in each other's reflected glory, increase the reinforcement provided to the other for good performance, and decrease motivation to compete with the partner.

Does this process necessarily result in individuals giving something up? We do not think so. For example, consider a couple, Mary and John, who meet at a gourmet cooking class, and are both interested in gourmet cooking. Rather than searching for ways to "out cook" each other, a strategy that is sure to result in a negative self-evaluation for at least one partner, Mary and John might instead specialize in their cooking. Over time, and in response to various within-dyad comparisons, Mary may limit her self description to the domain of "Gourmet French Cook" while thinking of John as a "Gourmet Vietnamese Cook." In so doing, Mary is able to view herself as sharing similar interests and values with John, but also as having a unique performance domain within the area of cooking in which she is best. Alternatively, Mary and John may cook meals together with each taking a different role in the cooking process, thereby specializing with regard to the process of cooking and precluding competition about who cooks better (cf. Clark & Bennett, 1992). Or, after repeated instances of each being outperformed, either Mary or John may reduce the relevance of cooking to their self-definitions, rendering it an area in which it is easier to bask in the other's reflected glory. In each of these examples, the potential problem of competition has been resolved by changing the relevance of the original area.

Divergence in relevance ratings may also set the stage for dyadic interactions that increase the likelihood of ceding the area to the partner in the future, creating a self-sustaining positive feedback loop (Kelley, 1983a, 1983b). Indeed, areas of partner strength in which the self and partner diverge might come to be idealized as evidence of the good "fit" between the self and the partner, and so may feed into felt satisfaction and commitment (Murray et al., 1996; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Likewise, once an area has been ceded to the partner, the general drive for identity and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ruble, 1987; Stryker & Statham, 1985) may come to be focused increasingly on the remaining areas of high self-relevance that have not been ceded to the

partner. Thus, individuals may increasingly view themselves as compatible with their partners, and perhaps as less compatible with other potential partners.

In terms of relationship satisfaction, one might speculate that a well-developed performance ecology that provides both partners with clear areas of leadership and control within the relationship would be associated with relatively more satisfying interactions and relatively fewer negative interactions (cf. Houts et al., 1996). Conversely, difficulty in establishing a workable, shared performance ecology would seem to provide occasion for competitive interactions, with one of the partners winning and one losing, and both partners wondering if they really belong together. If so, successful adjustments of relevance should lead to more harmonious interaction with one's partner, and to the feeling that one's partner encourages one to do one's best. It should also lead to the belief that one is contributing things of value to the relationship, and that the relationship is compatible with one's own needs for self-expression. Accordingly, the impact of relevance adjustments on couple satisfaction could be profound.

In Study 2 we found that couples in more committed relationships (that is, married couples) showed "sympathetic" reactions to their partner's likely self-evaluation threat. In addition, the sympathetic reaction was significantly more pronounced among married couples than among dating couples. It may be that married couples are more closely attuned to possible reactions from the partner, and may treat partner outcomes in a manner similar to their treatment of their own outcomes (cf. Aron et al., 1991). At a minimum, married partners appear willing to make adjustments in partner relevance that create for themselves the perception that the partner has ceded to them the area in which they performed better. This process may help reduce concern that the partner has been distressed by the outcome.

### Ecological Validity

Are adjustments in self-relevance limited to the laboratory, or might they affect important aspects of marital interaction? Earlier work inspired by the SEM model suggests there may be considerable ecological validity to the model, and that the processes highlighted in experimental laboratory studies may be observed in important aspects of couple interaction as well. For example, the study by Beach and Tesser (1993) examined differentiation in the area of decision making

and related this to marital satisfaction. Husbands and wives who were more complementary with regard to the areas in which they exercised decision-making power were more satisfied. That is, husbands and wives who saw themselves as making decisions in the areas important to the self and saw the partner as making decisions in areas important to the partner were the most satisfied. Importantly, there was no association between satisfaction and simply having more decision-making power overall in the relationship. Likewise, work by Pilkington, Tesser, and Stephens (1991) found that dating couples provided considerable evidence of differentiation across 68 performance domains, with a strong tendency to view the self as doing better in areas important to the self and the partner doing better in areas not important to the self.

Also, if adjustments are central to avoiding negative feelings and conflict, one might expect to see consequences on the quality of problem-solving communication if one provided performance feedback while constraining the possibility of adjustments. We did this manipulation in a recent study (O'Mahen, Beach, & Tesser, 2000) and found results consistent with our model. That is, we gave couples feedback about performance in areas that they identified in advance as more or less important to the self and we precluded excuses and alternative explanations for poor performance relative to the partner. As predicted, those who were led to believe that they had been outperformed by their partner in an area in which they claimed expertise but their partner did not claim expertise, displayed a different and more negative pattern of communication during problem solving. Those who were outperformed by their partner in an area in which their partner had the expertise and they did not, displayed a more positive pattern of problem-solving communication. Accordingly, it appears that precluding adjustments in response to performance feedback can set the stage for less constructive verbal exchanges.

### Methodological Implications and Future Directions

The current studies examined only the first component of a process that would need to be tied to other self and couple processes if it is to influence broad indices of couple functioning such as satisfaction or relationship maintenance. Our dependent variable may be characterized as "perceived fit with the partner," and the fact that we were successful in changing it through manipulations of feedback indicates that it is only loosely constrained by relationship history and agreement

among dating partners. Hypothesized links to other self-processes, or to overt patterns of accommodation to the partner, were not examined. We cannot be certain, therefore, that initial patterns of divergence are maintained, or that they come to direct couple decision making and interaction. Most importantly, speculation that divergence in self and partner-relevance may serve to increase satisfaction with the partner and so facilitate couple commitment remains to be investigated.

Has the current series of studies established a new grounding for the SEM model, established a new theory that is independent of the SEM model, or simply taken a part of the SEM model and elaborated its implications? While it may be premature to claim success in any of these respects, an important hypothesis is suggested by the current elaboration of the SEM model, one that was not suggested by the original SEM model or its extension to marriage. The original SEM model provided us with a clear rationale for examining three dimensions: closeness (for example, married versus dating), performance (self or partner better), and self-relevance (high versus low). It also indicated that self-evaluation threat was an important source of motivation for divergence. In addition, the SEM model extended to marriage highlighted the potential importance of perceived partner-relevance in determining affective reactions, and suggested that concern for partner outcomes may also be motivating when the relationship is a committed one. In the current chapter we address the more fundamental question of the adaptive significance of SEM adjustments. Why do we have a tendency to respond in this way to performance feedback? To ask this question opens up the possibility of placing the model in an evolutionary context (cf. Beach & Tesser, 2000). As is illustrated by the current chapter, the exercise of considering the implications of an evolutionary framework may stimulate new directions in research on personal relationships.

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