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Abstract

Individuals in ongoing romantic relationships incorporate attributes from their partner into their own self-concepts. However, little research has investigated what happens to these attributes should the relationship end. Across three studies, the present research sought to examine factors that predicted whether individuals retain or reject attributes from their self-concept that they initially gained during a relationship. We predicted that individuals would be more likely to reject attributes from their self post-dissolution if their ex-partner was influential in them adding those attributes to the self in the first place. However, we expected this effect to be moderated such that individuals who exerted greater, versus lesser, effort in maintaining relevant attributes would retain them as part of the self, regardless of whether the attribute originated from the partner. In addition, in two of our three studies, we explored the roles of partner influence, effort, and attribute rejection on individuals' post-dissolution self-concept clarity.

Keywords

self/identity, relationship dissolution, romantic relationships, effort

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Susan and John dated for several years but recently broke up. Even before they started dating, John was an avid marathon runner. During their relationship, Susan also started running marathons because John enjoyed them, although this wasn't something she had ever done before. Now that their romantic relationship has ended, what factors might predict whether or not Susan will continue being a marathon runner—an aspect of her self-concept that she did not possess before meeting her now ex-partner? Furthermore, what would be better for Susan's overall view of who she is: to continue endorsing an attribute from her defunct relationship or to reject it from her self-concept?

As illustrated above, individuals in romantic relationships weave aspects of their partner into their self-concepts, forging a self-concept that is intertwined with their partner (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003). To date, little to no research has investigated how individuals decide—explicitly or otherwise—whether to retain or reject aspects of the self-concept that they gained from their partner if the relationship ends. Relatedly, little to no research has examined how this decision to retain or reject aspects of the self-concept might influence individuals' self-concept clarity, or sense of knowing who they are.

The current research examined these gaps in the literature. We propose that the decision to retain or reject attributes will depend on the extent to which the ex-partner influenced the adoption of those attributes and the amount of effort the individual put into maintaining them as part of the self. We conceptualized partner influence as the idea that individuals possess certain attributes as a result of sharing a portion of their lives with their partner, not that their partner forced or pressured them into possessing the attribute. For example, Susan opted to become a marathon runner because John ran, not because John forced her into doing so. Similarly, we conceptualized effort as the psychological and physical effort that individuals exert to maintain the attributes in question. Susan likely had to invest more psychologically as well as train harder physically to run marathons, versus a mile around her neighborhood. Thus, we predict that if individuals possess

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attributes that were more, versus less, influenced by their ex-partner, they should be more likely to reject them from the self-concept after the end of their relationship. However, individuals should only be likely to reject attributes post-dissolution that they possess due to their partner if they exerted a minimal, versus a more substantial, amount of effort in maintaining the attributes. We also explored the association that partner influence, effort, and rejecting attributes from the self after the end of a relationship might have with individuals' overall level of self-concept clarity.

The Self-Concept in Relationships

The self-concept encompasses the ways that people represent themselves, the fluid collection of schemas, views, beliefs, preferences, and aspirations that comprise a person's sense of identity (James, 1890; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Through their personal and social experiences in the world, individuals come to view themselves as possessing particular self-aspects or attributes. These attributes then, centrally or tangentially, contribute to individuals' overall views of themselves as cohesive individuals (Epstein, 1977). In general, the self-concept is simultaneously durable and malleable, with central aspects of self-concept being fairly stable and tangential aspects being more prone to change over time and context (e.g., Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). Importantly, individuals' social relationships are a critical source of self-knowledge and change (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Aron et al., 1991).

In the context of close relationships, particularly romantic relationships, self-concept change often occurs through self-expansion. As individuals become closer to their partners, they incorporate aspects of their partners into the self, expanding the content of their self-concepts in the process (Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron et al., 1991; 1992). Self-expansion is a common—and usually a beneficial—process in romantic relationships (e.g., Aron, 2003), that typically results in cognitive overlap in romantic partners' self-concepts. This cognitive interdependence results in individuals viewing themselves in dyadic terms, as evidenced by the greater use of plural pronouns such as “we” or “us,” especially to the extent that individuals feel highly committed to their relationships (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). This integration between the self and close others can be so pronounced that individuals even mistake traits belonging to close others as belonging to the self, and vice versa (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; Mashek et al., 2003). Although self–other integration often occurs due to shared experiences, time, and self-disclosures with one's partner, it can also be a motivated process, spontaneously undertaken to further the relationship (Slotter & Gardner, 2009).

Relationship Dissolution and the Self

In general, the integration that occurs between partners' selves during an ongoing relationship is a positive process

that promotes closeness and commitment (Agnew et al., 1998). Yet, many relationships end. In the United States alone, nearly 2 million adults divorce every year, and the end of dating relationships is even more common (e.g., Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010). Whether the end of a marriage or the termination of a dating relationship, relationship dissolution is a highly distressing experience (e.g., Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Sbarra, 2006; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), particularly among individuals whose relationships have lasted longer (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998) or among individuals who perceive their relationship to be an important aspect of their self-concepts (Smith & Cohen, 1993).

Such severe distress results from relationship dissolution partly because when individuals' relationships end, not only does their relationship status change, but their self-concept also changes. Individuals experience self-concept contraction, a shrinking of the self-concept, after a relationship ends (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). For example, participants who imagine their relationship ending feel that their selves have become smaller and list fewer non-redundant attributes as being characteristic of the self (Lewandowski et al., 2006). Changes to the self-concept, in turn, predict low self-concept clarity—or a reduced certainty about who one is (e.g., Campbell et al., 1996; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Self-concept clarity is generally associated with a host of positive personality characteristics and psychological well-being (e.g., Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Campbell, 1990), and after the end of a romantic relationship, declines in self-concept clarity account for part of the association between dissolution and emotional distress (Slotter et al., 2010).

The influence of relationship dissolution on individuals has ramifications beyond the structure of the self-concept as the self-relevant implications or relational loss influence well-being. Individuals who have difficulty restoring their self-concepts following the end of a relationship exhibit lower levels of later well-being (Mason, Law, Bryan, Portley, & Sbarra, 2012). Moreover, as previously discussed, low self-concept clarity after the breakup of a dating relationship (Slotter et al., 2010) and continuing to include the former partner in the self (Boelen & Van Den Hout, 2010) both predict emotional distress. Although the end of a relationship that offers little or no self-expansion can be beneficial for the self-concept, the end of a relationship characterized by high levels of self–other integration is associated with feeling a loss of self (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Similarly, the perceived rediscovery of one's self as well as increased self-concept clarity more generally (i.e., Lee & Sbarra, 2013; Mason et al., 2012) are associated with enhanced emotional recovery post-dissolution.

The Present Research

Existing research demonstrates that relationship dissolution generally alters the self-concept; however, no research to

date has examined what happens to the specific aspects of the partner that were added to the self while the relationship was ongoing. When might individuals reject attributes that they adopted from a former partner, and when do they keep them? Furthermore, how might individuals' tendencies to keep or reject particular self-aspects influence the overall clarity of their selves? Addressing these questions was the core goal of the present research.

With regard to attribute rejection, we proposed that the extent to which the ex-partner influenced the adoption of a particular attribute, in combination with the effort the individual has invested in maintaining in it, will determine whether the attribute is jettisoned from the self-concept following the end of a relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that partner influence would negatively predict retaining an attribute: After the end of a relationship, attributes that individuals felt they possessed due to their partner's influence would be more likely to be rejected from the self-concept than attributes that individuals felt originated within themselves (Hypothesis 1 [H1]). We based this prediction on the copious research from the cognitive dissonance tradition demonstrating that individuals are more likely to adhere to and internalize beliefs and attitudes that are self-originated rather than imposed (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). In addition, individuals may have possessed attributes that originate from themselves for longer than the duration of their relationship, making them more likely to be central and stable aspects of the self-concept (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987) than attributes added more recently during the relationship.

We also proposed that effort to maintain an attribute would moderate the effect of partner influence on attribute rejection after a relationship ends. Specifically, we hypothesized that participants who perceived that they had exerted greater effort in maintaining attributes that they possessed due to their partner's influence would retain, rather than reject, these attributes after the end of their relationship (Hypothesis 2a [H2a]). In contrast, we hypothesized that effort would not be associated with attribute retention versus rejection for attributes that participants felt originated from themselves (Hypothesis 2b [H2b]), as these attributes would be unlikely to be rejected from the self post-dissolution in the first place (see H1). We based these predictions on previous research suggesting that, among activities that are equally enjoyable, individuals perceive those requiring high psychological effort to be more important to them and more interesting than are activities entailing low effort (Waterman, 2005). Similarly, a meta-analysis of the goal commitment literature has found that task difficulty is significantly associated with task commitment: when people are faced with a task requiring higher levels of effort, they are more committed to following through on it (Wofford, Goodwin, & Premack, 1992). According to cognitive dissonance theory, greater effort also predicts greater internalization of attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Aronson & Mills, 1959). Thus, investing greater effort to

maintain an attribute should increase its importance and one's commitment to and internalization of that attribute. Therefore, to the extent that people invest greater effort into an attribute gained due to their partner's influence, they should be more likely to retain that attribute following a relationship's end.

With regard to how attribute rejection might influence self-concept clarity, we adopted an exploratory approach to test two competing hypotheses. On one hand, previous work demonstrates that, when imagining or recalling the end of a romantic relationship, greater forecasted or recalled general change in the content of the self-concept due to the dissolution is associated with reduced current self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2010). Thus, changing one's self-concept by rejecting, rather than retaining, particular attributes after the end of a relationship may predict reduced self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 3a [H3a]). On the other hand, maintaining attributes that were originally incorporated into the self from a now ex-partner could be painful and confusing for individuals. Continued inclusion of the ex-partner in the self is associated with prolonged post-dissolution distress (Boelen & Van Den Hout, 2010). Thus retaining, rather than rejecting, particular attributes after the end of a relationship may predict reduced self-concept clarity (Hypothesis 3b [H3b]).

We tested our model, outlined in Figure 1, across three studies. In Studies 1 and 2, we tested H1, H2a, and H2b (Figure 1, Panel A). We examined individuals' forecasts of rejecting (Study 1) or actual rejection of (Study 2) attributes from their self-concept, after imagining the end of their relationship, as a function of whether their partner influenced them in adopting the attribute and the effort they exerted to maintain the attribute. In the present research, attributes were defined as activities, hobbies, personality traits, or lifestyle choices. We explored the association between attribute rejection and self-concept clarity in Studies 2 and 3 (H3a vs. H3b; Figure 1, Panel B). We examined how participants' actual attribute endorsement after imagining the end of their relationship predicted current self-concept clarity (Study 2) as well as how partner influence on and effort exerted toward overall self-change while in a relationship, rather than examining specific attribute-relevant change, might influence overall self-concept clarity among individuals who actually experienced the end of a dating relationship, compared with individuals whose relationships remained intact (Study 3). We examined whether partner influence on and exerted effort in general self-change while in a relationship, rather than examining specific attribute-relevant change, would interact to predict self-concept clarity.

Study 1

Method

Participants. One hundred twenty-four individuals (72 women) took part in the current study. On average, participants were 31.99 years of age ($SD = 11.03$, range = 18-67).

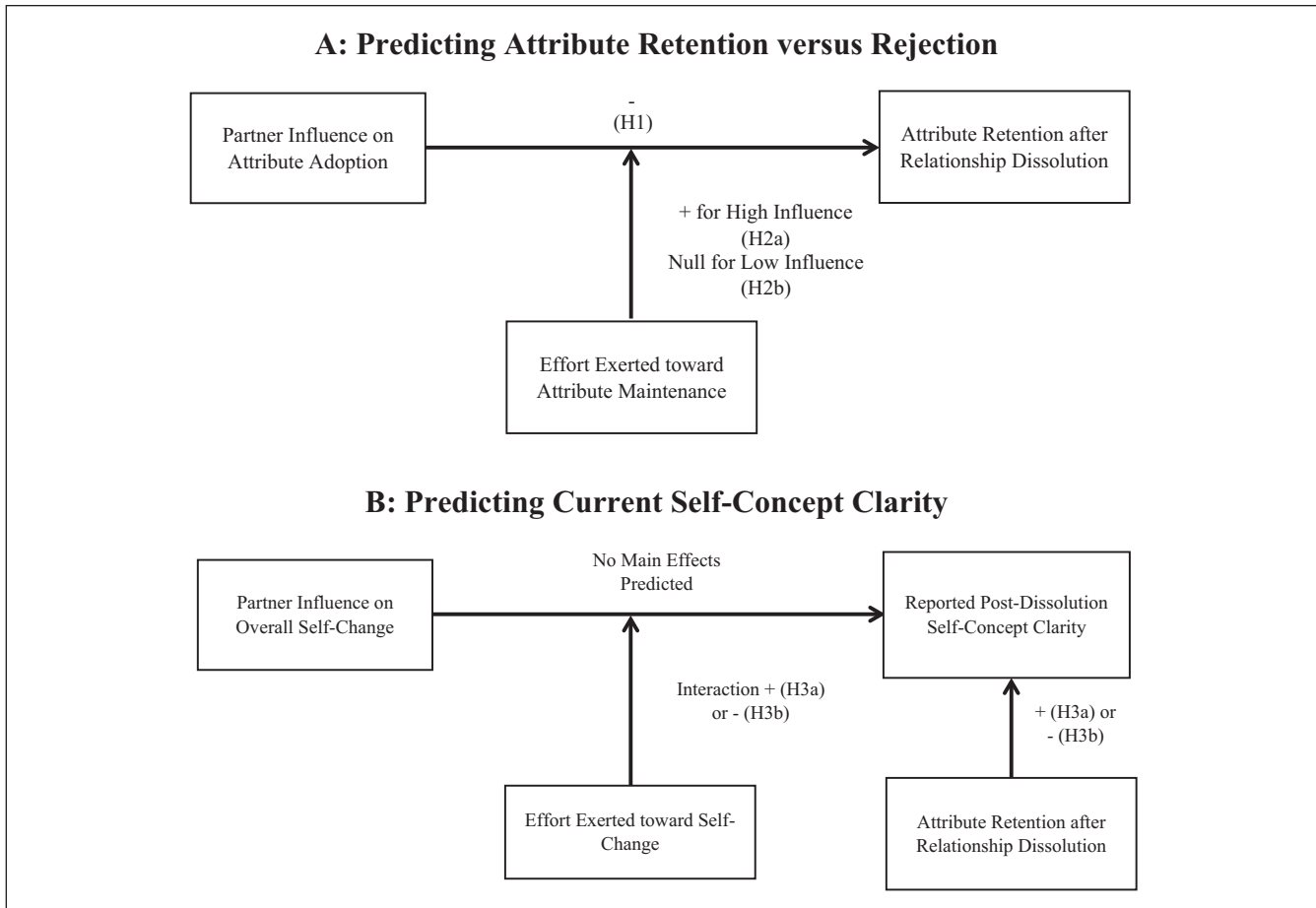


Figure 1. The theoretical model for the present research.

All participants reported being currently involved in an exclusive heterosexual romantic relationship of at least 1 month in length ($M = 92.84$ months, $SD = 103.55$, range = 1-480; 51.8% dating, 43.2% married, 5% engaged). Participants completed this study as a single survey through Amazon.com's "Mechanical Turk" website (MTurk). MTurk is a website where over 100,000 users ("workers") complete tens of thousands of tasks daily (Pontin, 2007). Workers browse the tasks, choose which ones to complete, and receive payment after completing them. MTurk samples are slightly more representative of the U.S. population than standard American samples and significantly more diverse than typical American college samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants were paid US \$0.50 for their time.

Procedure. Participants listed five attributes (i.e., characteristics or traits) that they believed were true of them. For each attribute they generated, participants completed, in the listed order, the measures of partner influence and effort described below before reporting the centrality of each attribute to their self-concept and how likely they thought they would be to retain each attribute as part of their self-concept

if their relationship with their partner were to end. After data collection, the attributes generated by participants were classified as either personality relevant (e.g., creative, intelligent) or activity relevant (e.g., reading, travelling). The majority of attributes were classified as activity relevant (90.1%) and all of the attributes generated were positively valenced.

Measures

Partner influence. Participants reported on the degree to which they thought their romantic partner was influential in them possessing each of the attributes as part of their self-concept on a three-item measure (e.g., "My partner is responsible for me possessing this attribute"; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; α across attributes = .78; $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.50$).

Effort. Participants reported on how much effort they put into maintaining each attribute as part of their self-concept on a three-item measure (e.g., "I invest a lot into making this attribute true of me"; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; α across attributes = .76; $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.26$).

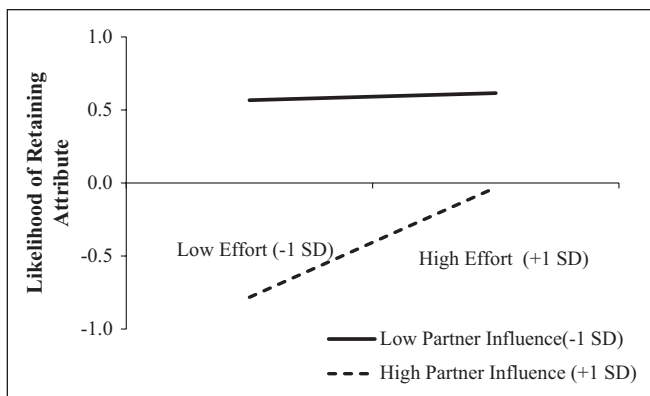


Figure 2. Forecasted likelihood of retaining attributes as a function of partner influence and effort.

Predicted likelihood of retaining attribute. Participants completed a one-item measure asking them to forecast how likely they felt they would be to keep each attribute if their relationship were to end (“How likely do you think you would be to still possess this attribute if your relationship were to end?” $1 = \text{not at all}$, $7 = \text{extremely}$; $M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.27$).

Results and Discussion

To test our predictions, we conducted two multi-level analyses using a one-with-many approach to account for non-independence in our data due to participants generating and reporting on multiple attributes (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Our analyses examined participants’ predictions that they would retain attributes if their relationship ended as a function of the degree to which they thought their partner influenced them having the attribute in the first place, the amount of effort they put into maintaining the attribute as part of their self, and the interaction between these variables. All variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) prior to analysis.

When predicting participants’ forecasts of retaining attributes as part of the self post-dissolution, the predicted main effect of partner influence emerged, $\beta = -0.50$, $t(526) = -17.56$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-0.56, -0.45]$, supporting H1. A main effect of effort also emerged, $\beta = .23$, $t(531) = 8.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $[0.18, 0.29]$; however, as predicted, both main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(546) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $[0.13, 0.23]$ (Figure 2).¹ We examined the simple effect of effort on the likelihood of retaining the attribute among participants who perceived their partner’s influence in them having that attribute to be relatively low ($-1 SD$) versus high ($+1 SD$). As predicted, when participants believed that their partner was largely influential in them having an attribute, putting greater effort into maintaining that attribute predicted participants believing they were more likely to retain the attribute (i.e., less likely to reject the attribute) if their

relationship ended, $\beta = 0.41$, $t(589) = 10.82$, $p < .001$, supporting H2a. In contrast, when participants believed that their partner was not influential in them possessing an attribute, the amount of effort they exerted to maintain an attribute did not predict how likely they thought they were to keep that attribute post-relationship dissolution, $\beta = 0.06$, $t(465) = 1.54$, $p = .12$, supporting H2b.

Taken together, the results of Study 1 demonstrate that individuals’ perceptions of both their partner’s influence on the attributes they possess and the effort they put into those attributes predict their expectation that they would keep the attribute if their relationship were to end. In general, participants thought they would be less likely to keep attributes post-dissolution that originated from their partner (H1). However, this main effect was qualified by the amount of effort participants exerted in maintaining the attributes in question. Specifically, participants reported being more likely to reject attributes that their partner influenced them to adopt to the extent they exerted relatively little effort in maintaining the attribute (H2a). Attributes that were not partner-originated did not show this pattern (H2b). Thus, Study 1 supported our hypotheses by showing that individuals may keep some of the attributes that they acquire via self-expansion and cognitive interdependence in ongoing relationships after those relationships end, depending on their beliefs about the attributes in question.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to expand upon Study 1 in three ways. First, Study 2 experimentally manipulated participants’ experience of their relationships as intact versus dissolved. Participants in Study 2 were randomly assigned to either imagine their relationship ending or a control scenario using a well-validated paradigm (Lewandowski et al., 2006) as our hypotheses regarding partner influence (H1) and effort (H2a/b) are only relevant to individuals after the loss of a romantic relationship. Second, Study 2 sought to identify whether perceptions of effort put into maintaining an attribute cause participants to retain or reject the attribute after the end of a relationship. To that end, participants in Study 2 were randomly assigned to one of two false feedback conditions leading them to believe that they either put a great deal of effort into maintaining a target attribute or put little effort into doing so. Third, Study 2 began to explore the relationship between actual, rather than forecasted, post-dissolution attribute endorsement and self-concept clarity.

Method

Participants. Two hundred thirty-two individuals (116 women) took part in the current study. On average, participants were 34.30 years of age ($SD = 11.78$, range = 18-67). All participants reported being currently involved in an exclusive heterosexual romantic relationship of at least one

month in length ($M = 86.98$ months, $SD = 106.74$, range = 1-564; 44.4% dating, 50% married, 5.6% engaged). Participants completed this study as a single survey through Amazon.com's "Mechanical Turk" website (MTurk; Buhrmester et al., 2011) and were paid US \$0.50 for their time.

Procedure. Participants completed all measures in a single online session. Participants provided one attribute that they believed was true of them. For this attribute, participants completed the measure of partner influence used in Study 1. As in Study 1, the attributes generated by the participants were later classified as either personality relevant or activity relevant attributes. The majority of attributes generated were classified as activity relevant (85.6%) and all of the attributes generated were positively valenced.

Participants then completed a fabricated questionnaire that ostensibly assessed how much effort they exerted in maintaining the attribute as part of their self-concept. As a cover story, participants were told that their responses on the questionnaire were indicative of how much effort they put into the aspect of themselves that they had generated previously, including effort they may not be consciously aware of. Participants were randomly assigned to receive false feedback, allegedly based on their responses to the questionnaire. Participants in the *low effort* condition read a statement claiming that, compared to other participants in the study, they put very little effort into maintaining the attribute they generated as part of their identity. In contrast, participants in the *high effort* condition read a statement claiming that, compared with other participants in the study, they put a great deal of effort into maintaining the attribute they generated as part of their identity. A suspicion check, conducted at the end of the study, revealed that all participants believed the cover story and false feedback.

Participants were then randomly assigned to write an essay on one of two different topics. In the *control* condition, participants were asked to imagine and write about their plans for the upcoming weekend. In the *dissolution* condition, participants were asked to imagine and write about the end of their relationship. Specifically, we employed the manipulation developed by Lewandowski and colleagues (2006), which asked participants to imagine that they and their partner must end their relationship because their partner just found out that he/she had been selected for a secret military intelligence operation as a child which now meant that he or she had to move to an undisclosed location for a minimum of 10 years and could have no contact with anyone from his or her former life. Thus, this manipulation asked participants to imagine their relationship was ending for reasons that were beyond the partner's control but meant that they could no longer be a couple. Participants were asked to imagine their assigned scenario for 1 min and then to write about their thoughts and feelings regarding the scenario for 3 min.

After writing their assigned essay, participants completed a single-item measure of how upset they felt as a manipulation

check. Participants then completed the self-rating task in which they endorsed a series of attributes with regard to how characteristic each was of them. Importantly, the attribute that they had generated at the beginning of the study was embedded in the list. Finally, they completed a measure of self-concept clarity.

Measures

Partner influence. Participants reported on the degree to which they thought their romantic partner was influential in them possessing each of the attributes as part of their self-concept with the same measure used in Study 1 ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.19$).

Emotional distress. Participants completed a one-item measure of how distressed they were by the essay manipulation ("I feel emotionally upset right now"; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; $M = 4.17$, $SD = 2.55$).

Attribute endorsement. Participants rated how characteristic each of 12 attributes was of their sense of self (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Embedded in this list was the target attribute that participants had generated earlier in the study ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.30$). The 11 non-target attributes were averaged together to create an index of participants' propensity to rate attributes as characteristic of themselves in general ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.90$).

Self-concept clarity. Participants completed a 12-item measure of the clarity and consistency with which they viewed their self-concept (e.g., "In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am"; 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*; $\alpha = .93$; $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.32$; Campbell et al., 1996).

Results and Discussion

To test our predictions, we conducted a multiple regression analysis predicting participants' ratings of the target attribute they generated at the beginning of the study as a function of self-reported partner influence, effort condition, essay condition, and all interactions between these variables. All continuous variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) prior to analysis; effort condition (*low effort* = -1, *high effort* = 1) and essay condition (*control* = -1, *dissolution* = 1) were effect coded.

We first examined participants' reported level of emotional distress after completing their assigned essay in the control or dissolution conditions. We predicted emotional distress from our complete model and, as predicted, only dissolution condition emerged as a significant predictor of distress. Confirming the effectiveness of our manipulation, participants in the dissolution condition reported being more distressed than participants in the control condition, $\beta = .77$, $t(224) = 17.69$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [1.43, 2.16].²

Table 1. Effects From the Full Model Tested in Study 2.

Parameter	β estimate	t value	95% confidence interval
Intercept	-.81	-2.76***	[-0.06, 0.18]
Dissolution condition	-.12	-1.96 [†]	[-0.24, 0.01]
Partner influence	-.22	-2.80**	[-0.37, -0.07]
Effort condition	.14	2.24*	[0.02, 0.26]
Dissolution \times Partner influence	-.21	-2.61**	[-0.36, -0.05]
Dissolution \times Effort	.09	1.44	[-0.03, 0.21]
Partner responsibility \times Effort	.11	1.37	[-0.05, 0.26]
Dissolution \times Partner influence \times Effort	.28	3.51***	[0.12, 0.43]

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

We next examined participants' endorsement of the target attribute (see Table 1 for the full model with 95% CIs). As predicted, a two-way interaction between dissolution condition and partner influence appeared, $\beta = -.21$, $t(224) = -2.61$, $p < .01$, such that partner influence predicted less attribute endorsement in general, but especially for participants who imagined their relationships ending. However, this effect was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction that emerged among partner influence, effort condition, and dissolution condition, $\beta = .28$, $t(224) = 3.51$, $p = .001$. We first examined the two-way interactions between partner influence and effort condition among participants who were assigned to the control versus dissolution conditions. As predicted, the Partner influence \times Effort interaction was non-significant among participants in the control condition (Figure 3A), $\beta = -.17$, $t(100) = -1.83$, $p = .08$. In contrast, the Partner influence \times Effort condition interaction was significant among participants in the dissolution condition (Figure 3B), $\beta = .38$, $t(124) = 3.35$, $p < .001$. As predicted, among participants who imagined their relationship ending and who believed their partner was highly influential in them possessing an attribute, being led to believe that they exerted high levels of effort predicted greater endorsement of the target attribute than when they thought they had invested little effort, $\beta = .61$, $t(124) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, supporting H2a. Stated differently, participants who thought their partner was highly influential in them possessing an attribute rejected that attribute from their self-concept (via less endorsement) after imagining the end of their relationship if they were led to believe they did not exert much effort at maintaining the attribute. Participants who imagined their relationship ending but who believed their partner was less influential in them possessing the attribute did not show this pattern, $\beta = -.16$, $t(124) = -1.06$, $p = .29$, supporting H2b.³

Finally, we sought to examine how participants' target attribute endorsement after imagining the end of their relationship

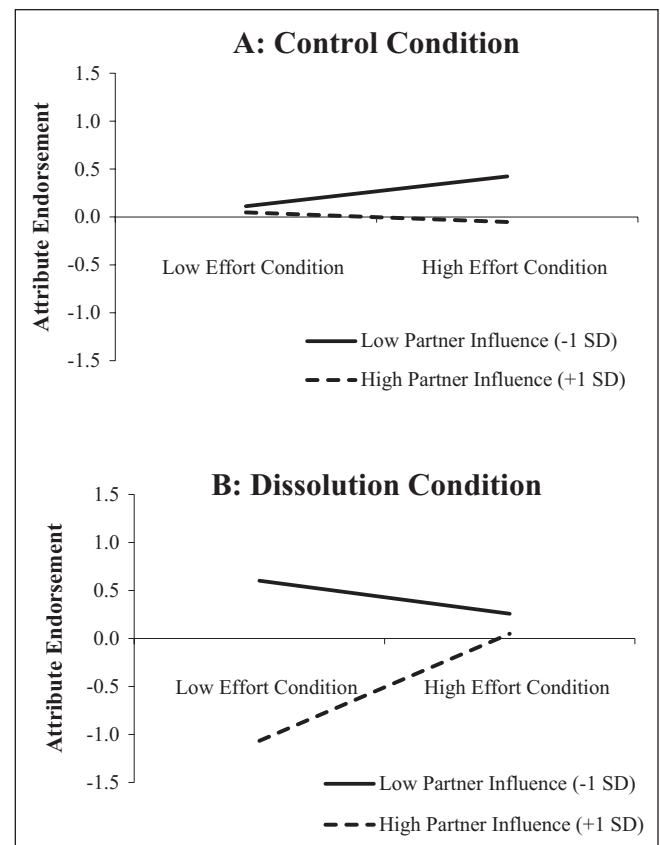


Figure 3. Self-rating of target attribute as a function of dissolution condition, partner influence, and effort condition.

would relate to their current experience of self-concept clarity. Thus, we conducted a regression analysis predicting self-concept clarity of participants in the dissolution condition from their ratings of the target attribute as characteristic of them (both standardized, $M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Greater endorsement of the target attribute after imagining a relationship dissolution in the current study predicted less self-concept clarity, $\beta = -.02$, $t(127) = -2.43$, $p = .01$, 95% CI = [-0.23, -0.06], supporting H3b. Importantly, this relationship did not exist for participants in the control condition, $\beta = .03$, $t(103) = 0.39$, $p = .70$, 95% CI = [-0.23, 0.34].

Taken together, the results of Study 2 demonstrated that, among participants who imagined their relationships ending, thinking that their partner was highly influential in them possessing an attribute predicted less endorsement of that attribute (H1). However, this effect was further qualified by the effort that participants were led to believe they exerted in maintaining the attribute. Specifically, participants whose partners were highly influential in them adopting their target attribute thought that attribute was more characteristic of them to the extent that they exerted more, versus less, effort in maintaining the attribute (H2a). Participants whose partners were less influential in the adoption of their target attribute did not show this pattern

(H2b). This pattern of effects converges with the findings from Study 1 by suggesting that, when relationships end, individuals may discard attributes that they believe they have due to the influence of the partner, unless they put high levels of effort into maintaining those attributes. The results from Study 2 also supported H3b, and not H3a, by showing that greater attribute endorsement after imagining the end of their relationship predicted less self-concept clarity among participants.

Of course, Study 2 was limited by the fact that participants in the current study imagined the end of a relationship, rather than actually experiencing relationship dissolution. Similarly, Study 2 was conducted in a single experimental session that, although affording experimental control, did not allow us to make claims regarding participants' self-concepts over time after the end of a romantic relationship. Study 3 addressed these two limitations.

Study 3

Study 3 continued our investigation into how individuals' selves change after a relationship ends as a function of how much influence their partner exerted over changes to their self-concept while the relationship is ongoing and the amount of effort that participants put into changing their self-concept. To this end, Study 3 examined an existing archival data set that followed dating college student couples for 6 months (see Slotter & Luchies, 2013, for additional use of this data set) with a focus on how these factors might influence individuals' self-concept clarity.

The central goal of Study 3 was to examine how the factors identified in the first two studies as influential regarding whether individuals keep or discard specific attributes after the end of a relationship might also influence individuals' perceptions of themselves at a more general level. Specifically, we were interested in expanding our examination of self-concept clarity from Study 2 by making it our key dependent variable of interest. Recall that in Study 2, among individuals whose partners were highly influential in them possessing the specific attributes, greater effort in maintaining those attributes predicted greater attribute endorsement after imagined dissolution. In addition, greater attribute endorsement after imagining the relationship ending predicted less self-concept clarity, supporting H3b. The primary goal of Study 3, then, was to further clarify which of our two competing hypotheses better captured the effect of partner influence and effort on the nature of self-change after the end of a relationship. Thus, we examined these factors among individuals whose relationships actually ended versus remained intact. We predicted that, in line with Study 2, among individuals whose partners were highly influential in their general self-change while in the relationship, greater effort in maintaining that general self-change would predict less self-concept clarity, but only for those participants whose relationships ended (H3b).

Method

Participants. One hundred fifty individuals, who represented both members of 75 undergraduate heterosexual dating couples, participated in a 6-month study of relationships. Participants were an average of 20.46 years old ($SD = 1.71$) and had been involved with their partner for an average of 16.80 months at the beginning of the study ($SD = 13.73$). Participants were recruited via flyers placed around campus and advertisements in the student newspaper. Participants were paid US \$35 for completing an intake laboratory session relevant to the current investigation as well as US \$8 each for a series of 6 monthly follow-up assessments. Of the individuals who completed the laboratory intake session, 136 completed the final 6-month follow-up. Only these 136 individuals are included in the current study.

Procedure. The current study was an archival analysis of data collected as part of a larger examination of psychological processes in romantic relationships. Relevant to the current investigation, participants attended a laboratory session during which they engaged in a series of interactions with their partner. One of the interactions involved a 5-min conversation with their romantic partner about how each of them had changed their identity while in their relationship. This interaction focused on general self-change in the relationship rather than the adoption of specific attributes. This interaction was videotaped and subsequently coded by trained observers.

Participants individually completed follow-up assessments once a month for 6 months after their laboratory session. At each assessment, participants reported on whether they were still dating the partner with whom they had entered the study. On the final assessment at the end of the 6-month period, participants completed a measure of self-concept clarity.

Observer-rated measures. Seven trained observers, who were blind to study hypotheses, watched and rated participants' videotaped self-change interactions. The observers rated a variety of constructs from the videotapes, and those relevant to the current research are described below. Observers watched each video twice: once to rate the male partner's behavior and once to rate the female partner's behavior. The order in which coders rated the male and female partners from each couple was randomized across observers.

Partner influence. Observers rated the extent to which the change participants discussed had occurred due to the influence of their romantic partner versus external factors ($-3 =$ completely due to the partner, $3 =$ completely due to non-relational factors; $ICC = 0.72$; $M = -2.27$, $SD = 0.34$). They rated this dimension based on participants' explicit statements (e.g., "I never would have started skiing if I hadn't met you.").

Effort. Observers also rated the extent of the difficulty of the change participants discussed. Specifically, observers rated whether the participants' self-change was easy/effortless versus difficult/effortful ($-3 = \textit{extremely easy/effortless}$, $3 = \textit{extremely difficult/effortful}$, $ICC = 0.77$, $M = 0.78$, $SD = 0.44$). They rated this dimension based on participants' explicit statements (e.g., "Becoming vegetarian means I really have to pay attention to restaurant menus when we go out to eat").

Self-report measures

Dissolution status. At each wave of the study, participants reported on whether or not they were still involved in the romantic relationship they were in at the beginning of the study. Thus, participants were classified by dissolution status ($-1 = \textit{relationship intact}$, $1 = \textit{relationship dissolved}$) at the end of the 6-month study. At the end of the study, 23 individuals had experienced a romantic dissolution.

Self-concept clarity. At the end of the six-month study, participants completed a single-item measure of self-concept clarity ("In general, I have a clear idea of who I am and what I am"; $M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.00$). This single-item measure was used to reduce the reporting burden on participants and was taken from the full, single-factor, 12-item scale (Campbell et al., 1996). Individuals' scores on the single-item measure of self-concept clarity at the end of the study exhibited a positive correlation with their scores on the full-length from study intake ($r = .35$, $p < .001$).

Results and Discussion

To test our predictions, we conducted a multi-level analysis using a dyadic approach to account for the non-independence in our data generated by having two members of a couple report on the same measures (Kenny et al., 2006). Specifically, we predicted individual participants' self-concept clarity at the end of the study from participants' dissolution status at the end of the study, observer-rated partner responsibility for self-change from the interaction at study intake, observer-rated effort of self-change from the interaction at study intake, and all of their interactions. All continuous variables were standardized prior to analyses ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$), dissolution status was coded as noted above.

As predicted, a three-way interaction emerged between dissolution status, partner influence, and effort, $\beta = -.37$, $t(103) = 2.22$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2 for the complete model with 95% CIs).⁴ We next examined the two-way interactions between partner influence and effort among participants whose relationships had remained intact versus ended. As predicted, the Partner influence \times Effort interaction was non-significant among participants whose relationships remained intact (Figure 4A), $\beta = .02$, $t(101) = -0.35$, $p = .72$. In contrast, Partner influence \times Effort interaction was significant among participants whose relationships had ended during the

Table 2. Effects From the Full Model Tested in Study 3.

Parameter	β estimate	t value	95% confidence interval
Intercept	-.09	1.74	[-0.14, 0.21]
Dissolution status	-.18	-1.49	[-0.31, 0.04]
Partner influence in self-change	.02	-1.27	[-0.27, 0.11]
Effort of self-change	-.16	-0.77	[-0.15, 0.18]
Dissolution \times Partner influence	.15	1.13	[-0.08, 0.31]
Dissolution \times Effort	-.22	1.80 [†]	[-0.01, 0.36]
Partner influence \times Effort	-.35	-2.04*	[-0.05, 0.26]
Dissolution \times Partner influence \times Effort	-.37	2.22*	[0.04, 0.53]

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

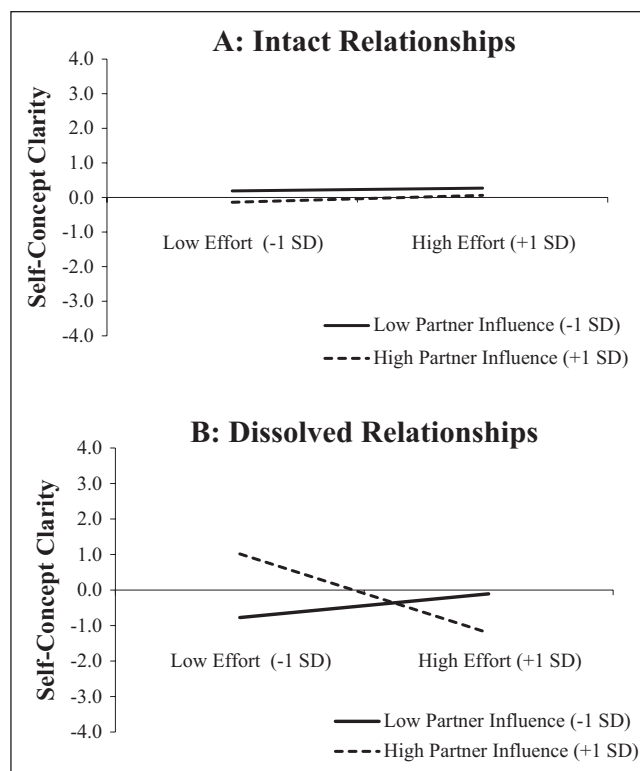


Figure 4. Self-concept clarity at the end of the 6-month study as a function of dissolution status, partner influence on self-change, and effort associated with self-change.

6-month study (Figure 4B), $\beta = -.75$, $t(22) = -2.08$, $p = .05$. Specifically, we examined the simple effect of effort of self-change on self-concept clarity among participants whose partners were less ($-1 SD$) versus more ($+1 SD$) influential in that change. As predicted, when participants' partners were more influential on their self-change in the relationship, greater effort of self-change predicted less self-concept clarity after the end of the relationship, $\beta = -.74$, $t(22) = -2.31$,

$p < .05$. In contrast, when participants' partners were less influential in their self-change in the relationship, effort of self-change did not predict self-concept clarity after the end of the relationship, $\beta = .36$, $t(22) = 0.93$, $p = .37$.

Taken together, the results of Study 3's archival data analysis indicate that both the effort put into self-change and the partner's influence in the self-change matter when predicting self-concept clarity after a romantic relationship ends. Specifically, self-change during the relationship that was largely due to the partner and was effortful for individuals predicted less self-concept clarity after the relationship ended. In contrast, effort of the self-change during the relationship was not related to post-dissolution self-concept clarity when the self-change was less influenced by the partner. These results support H3b and dovetail with the effects found in Study 2 demonstrating that individuals appear less likely to reject attributes that their partner was influential in them having after the end of a relationship (imagined in the case of Study 2) if they believed they exerted effort in maintaining those attributes; but continued endorsement of the attributes predicted less self-concept clarity. Specifically, Study 3 demonstrated that if a partner is highly influential in one's general self-change in a relationship, in addition to the specific attributes previously examined, exerting effort to achieve that self-change appears to backfire if the relationship ends in the form of less self-concept clarity.

General Discussion

Absorbing a partner's attributes into the self is generally a positive process in ongoing romantic relationships (e.g., Agnew et al., 1998; Aron, 2003). However, little or no previous research has examined what happens to those attributes from the partner if the relationship ends. The present research investigated two primary questions: What predicts whether people will retain or reject attributes from their ex-partner? Is rejecting attributes from an ex-partner beneficial or detrimental to the clarity of the self-concept? We hypothesized that individuals who perceived their partner as highly influential in them possessing an attribute would be likely to discard that attribute after the end of their relationship (H1), unless they exerted substantial effort to maintain it (H2a). However, for individuals whose partners were less influential in them possessing an attribute, effort would not predict attribute retention versus rejection (H2b). We tested and found support for these hypotheses in two studies (Studies 1 and 2).

We also explored two opposing possible effects of retaining versus rejecting attributes from the ex-partner on the overall clarity of the self. On one hand, self-concept change after relationship dissolution is associated with diminished self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2010), so rejecting attributes adopted from an ex-partner may be associated with lower self-concept clarity (H3a). On the other hand, continuing to include aspects of the former partner in the self might

be distressing and confusing, so rejecting attributes adopted from an ex-partner may be associated with higher self-concept clarity (H3b). We tested these ideas in Studies 2 and 3. Across these studies, support emerged for H3b and not for H3a. Individuals who imagined their relationship ending and who endorsed attributes as more characteristic of them reported lower self-concept clarity (Study 2). Individuals who actually experienced the end of a relationship reported lower self-concept clarity when their partners had more influence on their self-change during the relationship and when they had also put greater effort into their self-change (Study 3). Together, the findings from the present research expand our understanding of how individuals' selves change, both at the level of specific attributes and at a more general level, after the end of a romantic relationship.

Implications and Future Directions

The insights from the present research have implications for our understanding of how individuals negotiate their identities after a relationship ends. For example, the current work suggests a disconnect between how individuals think their general identities will be affected by the end of a relationship and how their general sense of self is actually influenced. In previous research, individuals who forecasted or recalled greater self-concept change after the end of a relationship reported lower self-concept clarity (Slotter et al., 2010). The findings from Studies 2 and 3 in the present research appear to contradict this earlier work. However, the earlier research by Slotter and colleagues (2010) asked participants to forecast or recall self-change in response to a romantic breakup and then used these forecasts or recollections to predict current self-concept clarity. The present work employed real-time self-change in response to a romantic breakup (either self-report or coded) to predict self-concept clarity. Research on affective forecasting demonstrates that individuals are often inaccurate when asked to imagine how they will feel in the future (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), and other work demonstrates that individuals' memories can be biased by relational factors (e.g., Gagné & Lydon, 2004; Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). Thus, the current research suggests that self-concept clarity in response to actual self-change may not dovetail with self-concept clarity associated with individuals' predictions or recollections of self-change. Future research should try to illuminate this interesting discrepancy empirically.

The present research may also help explain why individuals often experience self-concept constriction after the end of a relationship: that is, their self-concepts feel smaller (Lewandowski et al., 2006; Slotter et al., 2010). This effect is particularly pronounced among individuals who had high levels of self-expansion in their relationships before the dissolution (Lewandowski et al., 2006). Perhaps self-concept constriction represents a psychologically adaptive process of

discarding attributes influenced by the former partner from the self-concept. Individuals who do not experience self-concept constriction may be those who retain partner attributes after a relationship ends and ultimately experience lower levels of self-concept clarity. The present research cannot specifically test this hypothesis, but it does provide a potential explanation for why both self-concept constriction and self-concept confusion have emerged as responses to relationship dissolution in previous research.

Furthermore, these studies highlight a central irony of self-concept change in relationships. During a relationship, including aspects of the partner in the self is essential, as it facilitates closeness and commitment (Agnew et al., 1998; Aron et al., 1991). However, the current research suggests that the harder individuals try to incorporate aspects of their partners into their self-concepts during the relationship, the more their self-concepts will be damaged if the relationship ends. The very process that promotes relationship maintenance may leave the self-concept more vulnerable if the relationship should end.

The present research also opens up several potentially fruitful avenues for future research. For example, future work might examine whether other characteristics of attributes—such as their valence or type—might predict likelihood of post-dissolution rejection. The present work examined positively valenced preferences. Perhaps negative changes to the self (i.e., Slotter & Gardner, 2012) are more likely to be discarded than positive changes. Furthermore, changes to one's personality may be less likely to be discarded than acquired preferences. In addition, perhaps retaining negative attributes from the self would be especially damaging to self-concept clarity. Furthermore, future research would benefit from examining the mental and physical health correlates of keeping versus discarding attributes post-dissolution. We know that less self-concept clarity predicts greater emotional distress post-dissolution (Slotter et al., 2010) and that increases in self-concept clarity are generally associated with recovery from post-dissolution distress and emotional well-being in general (e.g., Bigler et al., 2001; Mason et al., 2012), but the specific pathways from attribute incorporation during the relationship, to attribute rejection after the relationship ends, to self-concept clarity, to distress have yet to be directly examined.

Future studies might also examine what happens if individuals retain attributes from a former partner when a new relationship begins. Perhaps the detrimental effects of dissolution on the self-concept explain why individuals who have high self-other integration with a former partner express a desire for their next partner's attributes, personality, and interests to be similar to those of their former partner (Lewandowski & Sahner, 2005). If the next partner shares attributes with the former partner, the self-concept could remain intact by simply transferring the individual's current self-in-relationship representation onto the new partner (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002). Conversely, if individuals jettison

attributes from their former partners from their self-concepts, can they restore the self-concept that they had before the relationship, or do they create a new self-concept? If individuals have multiple relationships over time, what are the long-term effects of repeatedly remaking the self?

Along similar lines, future work should also endeavor to investigate whether there are circumstances under which retaining attributes from an ex-partner is not damaging to the self. Perhaps, as mentioned above, if a new partner shares attributes of the former partner, retaining these attributes would not be as detrimental to the self-concept. Alternatively, if an individual has come to view attributes originally gained from their partner as part of their self in a truly central and authentic way, perhaps keeping those attributes would be less detrimental to the self. The present work did not assess participants' perceptions of attribute authenticity, and future work would benefit from doing so.

Finally, future research should investigate whether and how the effects found in the present research might apply to bereaved individuals. We focused on relationship dissolutions where one or both partners opted to exit a relationship, rather than situations of bereavement where one partner dies, due to existing research suggesting a variety of psychological distinctions between the two situations (i.e., Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). However, existing work does suggest that self-concept clarity is an important factor associated with reduced likelihood of developing prolonged grief disorder (Boelen, Keijsers, & Van Den Hout, 2012) and that differing approaches to romantic relationships predict different patterns of recovery from bereavement (e.g., Field & Sundin, 2001). Thus, perhaps not hanging onto attributes from the deceased partner would be especially beneficial to bereaved partner, although bereaved individuals might be especially likely to retain attributes from their partner in an effort to remember him/her.

Strengths and Limitations

Although a number of studies have established that individuals in romantic relationships include aspects of their partners in their self-concepts (see Aron & Aron, 1997, for a review), this study is the first to our knowledge to investigate what happens to those attributes from the partner if the relationship ends. This research establishes both the predictors of retaining partner attributes after the end of a relationship and the ramifications of doing so. A major strength of the present research was that these findings were robust across cross-sectional, experimental, behavioral coding, and longitudinal methodologies that incorporated both imagined and actual relationship dissolutions. A secondary strength of the current research was the mix of both student and non-student adult sample populations, which incorporated a wide variety of relationship durations and classifications. In addition, with sample sizes of over 100 in every study, we believe that an additional strength of the current manuscript lies in the

adequate sample sizes and power. One exception to this strength was that only 23 individuals in Study 3 experienced relationship dissolution, making these analyses somewhat underpowered. That said, we certainly can't randomly assign individuals to end their relationships and the pattern of effects in Study 3 mirror those found in the earlier studies. Thus, we believe this issue to be minimal.

Despite the strengths of the present work, this research is not without limitations. For example, Study 3 assessed partner influence and effort on general self-change rather than particular attributes. Although Study 2 established that partner attributes into which individuals have put greater effort are more likely to be maintained after a dissolution, therefore suggesting that the individuals in Study 3 who reported high partner influence and high effort with regard to general self-change may have retained specific attributes relevant to the self-change, it would have been ideal to have a measure of specific attribute retention in Study 3. Furthermore, a longitudinal study, much like Study 3, which followed participants pre and post breakup that included all key variables would enhance our ecological validity. In addition, the current research does not directly investigate whether individuals make the decision to maintain or jettison attributes consciously or non-consciously. Future research could fruitfully attempt to address some of these issues, thus further clarifying the present findings.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships reshape the self-concept while they are ongoing, as individuals incorporate their partners' world-views, hobbies, personality traits, and lifestyles into their self-concepts. Although this self-other integration enables relationships to flourish, it may present a quandary if the relationship ends: should these attributes from the former partner be retained or discarded? The present research suggests that individuals preserve aspects they have garnered from a former partner in their self-concepts if they have invested greater, versus lesser, effort in those attributes. However, retaining those attributes may result in confusion over who they are after the relationship ends.

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Authors' Note

Access to materials and data sets are available upon request. The opinions and conclusions expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the National Science Foundation.

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Notes

1. We ran a series of auxiliary analyses to test whether our Partner influence \times Effort interaction effect would remain robust beyond and/or was moderated by the effects of gender, age, or relationship duration. Across analyses, our key interaction remained significant and was not moderated.
2. We conducted a parallel analysis only including dissolution condition, rather than our full model, as a predictor: results were nearly identical to those reported.
3. We ran a series of auxiliary analyses to test whether our Central dissolution \times Partner influence \times Effort interaction effect on attribute endorsement would remain robust beyond and/or was moderated by the effects of relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, relational power, inclusion of other in self, gender, age, relationship duration, and attribute type (personality vs. activity relevant), participants' rating on the other, non-target attributes or participants' ratings of attribute centrality to their self-concept at study intake, respectively. Across analyses, our key interaction remained significant and was not moderated. We ran an additional set of auxiliary analyses to determine whether our effect of target attribute endorsement predicting less self-concept clarity would remain robust beyond and/or was moderated by the effects of the same variables. Across analyses, the effect of target attribute endorsement on self-concept clarity endorsement remained at least marginal and was not moderated.
4. We next ran a series of two auxiliary analyses that examined whether our Central dissolution status \times Partner influence \times Effort interaction effect on self-concept clarity would remain robust beyond and/or was moderated by the effects of study intake self-concept clarity, gender, age, or relationship duration. In these stringent analyses, our key interaction remained at least marginal and was not moderated.

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