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Implications of Self-Other Overlap in Unsuccessful Romantic Relationships

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IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-OTHER OVERLAP IN UNSUCCESSFUL ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS

A Thesis Presented

by

J. ANNA BELL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2012

Clinical Psychology Program

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IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-OTHER OVERLAP IN UNSUCCESSFUL ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS

A Master's Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

IMPLICATIONS OF SELF-OTHER OVERLAP IN UNSUCCESSFUL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

August 2012

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The social psychological concept of self-other overlap describes how identities and cognitive representations of people have a tendency to merge as they become closer to one another. Because greater self-other overlap tends to be associated with such positive characteristics as closeness and intimacy, it has generally been considered a desirable trait in relationships. In a previous study (Bell, 2009), preliminary evidence supported the idea that there may in fact be negative consequences to having higher levels of self-other overlap in relationships with domestic violence, including diminished self-esteem and life satisfaction. The current study expands on Bell (2009) study and examines the implications of greater self-other overlap within three different samples: students currently in a romantic relationship, students that recently ended a romantic relationship, and women from a domestic violence shelter who recently ended a violent relationship.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

People are generally motivated by a strong desire to establish and maintain relationships with others. According to the *need to belong* hypothesis, creating relationships is not only something that people seek out and pursue but is also a fundamental and pervasive need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to this hypothesis individuals seek to establish positive relationships with others that are reciprocal and supportive in nature. Success in establishing these connections can have serious implications in terms of the amount of support received. For example, high levels of social support have been associated with several positive characteristics such as increased levels of happiness and well-being and can provide a buffer between stressful events and negative mental health outcomes (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997). Conversely, the absence of this support can often have negative effects, as the lack of support has been associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986).

The strength of the support received is directly related to the quality (and not the quantity) of social connections. Simply having a series of casual relationships with different individuals is not sufficient to fulfill this innate need to belong, since superficial interactions do not carry with them the same positive effects that would otherwise result from enduring, quality relationships (Cohen et al., 1986). Studies have demonstrated that

having individuals upon whom one can rely and feel supported by can serve as effective buffers, whereas having a broad social network alone is not sufficient (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983).

Not only do we seek out connections to other people, but once these relationships are created we are extremely averse to losing them. In some cases individuals may go to great lengths to maintain these bonds, even when remaining in these relationships runs contrary to our needs, desires, and even safety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1983). Such situations may be as benign as remaining with a partner who does not meet or appreciate one's needs, but individuals are often motivated to maintain relationships even when in an abusive relationship that leaves them exposed to violence and harm. Reluctance shown by many when ending relationships and the tendency of some individuals to stay with an abusive partner are illustrations of how strong our motivations can be in preserving our relationships. Although it can be difficult to understand from the perspective of someone outside the relationship, the benefits obtained from maintaining such relationships may, in some cases, outweigh the costs.

Although people establish relationships due to their desire for meaningful connections with others, it is theorized that they are also motivated to form these connections due to an underlying desire to add to who they are as individuals. Aron and Aron (1986) have developed a theoretical framework known as the "self-expansion model" that seeks to explain some of the motives behind relationship formation. According to this theory, this expansion occurs in two parts: expansion and integration. Through expansion, people want to increase complexity within their sense of self by

adding novel experiences. This acquiring new information in the expansion phase is often followed by a desire to reduce the complexity of this experience by incorporating this new information into the already established self-concept, a process known as integration. It is through both of these parts that one's sense of self grows and develops.

If people seek out relationships in an attempt to expand their self-concept, acquiring connections with others can be emotionally rewarding because it fulfills this motivation. In fact, there is evidence to support this idea, as the formation of new relationships, both platonic and romantic, tends to be experienced as pleasurable. Indeed, self-expansion seems to occur rapidly in the beginning stages of relationships, since it is during this time that there is a great exchange of information (Strong & Aron, 2006). Additionally, it is during the process of establishing relationships that the lines between self and other can be blurred and elements or characteristics of one person may be adopted or influenced by the other.

When people expand their sense of self by entering into a relationship they may adopt and integrate the resources, perspectives, and characteristics of their partner in the relationship and include them in their self-concept, increasing the degree to which the self and the other person "overlap" (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). For example, if one relationship partner is considered to be more artistic, through activities such as engaging in art-related discussions or attendance to art-related functions, the other, previously less-artistic partner might come to consider his or herself more artistic over the course of the relationship. By including their partner in their sense of self, individuals are, in a sense, blurring the boundaries between themselves and their partners as part of a process known

as self-other overlap. The existence of self-other overlap within romantic relationships can be especially pronounced, as the exchange of information, self-disclosure, and time spent together tends to be very high (Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004; Strong & Aron, 2006).

In an attempt to measure the amount of the self that overlaps with a partner, Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) developed a single-item measurement known as the Inclusion of Others in the Self (IOS) Scale. Using this scale, individuals were asked to rate overlap the amount of overlap they perceived themselves as sharing with a relationship partner. Participants were provided with seven increasingly overlapping circles (one circle labeled “self” and the other labeled “other”), and asked to indicate which of the figures best represented their perceived relationship with a partner. Based on findings from this measure, higher levels of self-other overlap were shown to be associated with a variety of positive characteristics. Greater overlap on this measure has been correlated with greater closeness, intimacy, commitment, and relationship quality (Aron et al., 1992; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003). The extent to which people indicated having self-other overlap with their romantic partners was also related to relationship robustness; self-other overlap was predictive of whether relationships were still intact three months later (Aron et al., 1992).

Other researchers have constructed alternative ways of measuring the overlap that occurs in close relationships. While Aron and colleagues have developed a way to measure self-other overlap using a visual depiction, Davis, Conklin, Smith, and Luce (1996) have developed a measure that assesses cognitive depictions of this overlap. By

utilizing adjective lists, Davis et al. (1996) asked participants to select which adjectives described themselves and which described another target. The number of adjectives that participants marked on both lists (essentially the number of characteristics that individual shares with their partner) indicates amount of perceived overlap that is shared between the two partners (Davis et al., 1991). This research was motivated by the desire to understand how perspective-taking might influence the amount of self-other overlap that one perceives as having with another. Within these experiments it was demonstrated that perspective-taking does increase the amount of self-other overlap, as measured by the percentage of overlapping adjectives.

The measure constructed by Davis et al. (1991) provides a different way of measuring self-other overlap that involves characteristics that participants see themselves as sharing with their partner. Although the adjective checklist that was developed by Davis et al. (1991) is a measure that has traditionally been used to evaluate the level of self-other overlap that follows perspective-taking, the current study uses it in the realm of close relationships by investigating its connection to self-esteem. The reasoning behind this usage is that within the literature both the IOS scale and the adjective checklist have generally been viewed as measuring the same concept, because both of these measurements are believed to be accessing self-other overlap. If these measurements are in fact measuring similar things as the literature has implied, then utilizing the adjective checklist in close relationships, a domain in which it has not been typically used (but is a domain in which the IOS is often used), should yield similar results. If the IOS and adjective checklists end up being related to different things, then it stands to reason that

these different measurements may produce different results when it comes to assessing different elements of self-other overlap.

There is increasing evidence to support the idea that these different measures of self-other overlap may actually be measuring somewhat different things. Myers and Hodges (in press) found evidence that self-other overlap might fall along two different dimensions that they termed “perceived closeness” and “overlapping representations.” The amount of perceived closeness was represented by the extent to which individuals feel close to the other person. Overlapping representations can be represented by the number of traits and characteristics that individuals perceives themselves sharing with another person. Myers and Hodges also found that perspective taking influenced one of these dimensions (“perceived closeness”) more than the other (“overlapping representations”), supporting the idea that these different measures of self-other overlap may actually be measuring separate constructs that occur within relationships.

Although people are strongly motivated to seek out and maintain relationships with others (and romantic relationships in particular), it is inevitable that some relationships will not be successful. Due to the fact that self-expansion is both generally sought-after and rewarding, the loss of those connections when a relationship ends can be upsetting. Furthermore, within the domain of self-other overlap the loss of that close and meaningful connection does not necessarily mean that those elements of the former partner that were incorporated into the self-concept are quickly and cleanly eliminated. It may be the case that elements of the former partner remain a part of the self-concept of

the person left behind long after the relationship has been terminated, which may make it more difficult for some individuals to “move on” after that relationship has ended.

Exploring the dissolution of romantic relationships, Agnew and Etcheverry (2006) examined how much individuals often still felt connected to their former relationships and relationship partners. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study in which three groups of individuals were assessed in regards to their commitment level and cognitive interdependence: those who stayed in their relationship, those who left their relationship, and those who were left by their partner. Within this study, cognitive interdependence was considered the extent to which participants felt they lost some of their sense of self when the relationship ended. Not surprisingly, those who terminated the relationship became less committed to their former partner and showed less cognitive interdependence with their former relationship and partner over time. Interestingly, those who were left by their partner showed no different pattern in their levels of commitment to or interdependence with their former relationship and partner than those who were currently in a relationship. The implication of this result is that some individuals who experience the end of their relationship appear to cognitively consider their relationship with their former partners as still intact, at least for a while.

Although the partners that are left behind may have some self-concept confusion directly following the dissolution of a relationship, this experience is not permanent. Eventually, individuals are forced to face the loss of their partner and that connection, and are left to assess which aspects of themselves are their own and which are shared with their former partner. Slotter, Gardner, and Finkel (2009) argue that individuals

experience a change in their self-concept in the aftermath of a breakup and may have difficulty identifying which aspects of themselves are known enduring parts of their sense of self (a concept identified as “self-concept clarity”) and which are elements of their former partner as they seek to regain a stable self-concept. Slotter et al. (2009) found that not only were individuals’ self-concepts less clear following a break-up, their self-concepts were also experienced as being smaller (self-concept constriction), and the content and perception of those selves was also changed. In some cases constriction and clarification of the self-concept can take time, since it tends to occur only when individuals have begun to accept the reality of the breakup and take steps to move on from that former relationship (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). Because there are aspects of the self that an individual might have shared with a former partner, goals, social circles and other activities may be changed or lost due to the dissolution of that relationship. As a direct result of those changes, individuals may see themselves as a person without some of the identities and opportunities that they had within the relationship, resulting in a reduced self-concept.

Additionally, the loss of close attachments is commonly associated with depression and guilt among those left by their partner, as individuals might blame themselves for the loss of the relationship (Jack, 1999). For those who did not initiate the break-up, coming to terms with rejection can also prove to be difficult to overcome (Sbarra, 2006; Slotter et al., 2009). These factors undoubtedly have implications for both self-esteem and well-being, as both of these can be negatively impacted in the aftermath of a break-up. It is possible that individuals may begin to see themselves as not being

good enough for the love and support that was previously offered by the partner, or may hold oneself responsible for the partner leaving.

Although the aftermath of a relationship can be difficult in that individuals have to come to terms with the stress of losing a relationship, there may be relationships that are in themselves extremely stressful, as is the case when there is the presence of extreme conflict and/or abuse. While relationships in general tend to be complicated and confusing, with many factors contributing to their formation and maintenance, relationships characterized by domestic violence often seemed especially perplexing. To an outside observer it may seem illogical that any individual would stay in a relationship that leaves her susceptible to physical harm. Those experiencing domestic violence are not generally kept behind barred windows or locked doors and so it may be difficult to comprehend why these victims would find it so hard to leave (Herman, 1992). However, the ties that bind the battered to the batterer are no less real to the victim.

Research on women in heterosexual relationships¹ indicates that the victim encounters many daunting obstacles if she is to leave an abusive partner. One of the most common reasons why a woman may stay with an abusive partner is lack of economic resources outside the relationship. In fact, past research has shown that economic dependence in the abusive relationship is correlated with the desire of women to stay with their abusive partner (Strube & Barbour, 1983). With a controlling and violent partner, a woman who leaves an abusive environment may find herself with no money, no car, and

¹ Although there are abusive relationships that involve women abusing men and sometimes occurs within same-sex relationships, the focus here is on the most prevalent of abusive relationships: male perpetrators and female victims in heterosexual relationships (Straus & Gelles, 1986).

no place to go (Lundberg-Love & Wilderson, 2006). Although there may be shelters for her to take refuge in, she may not be aware of their existence and there is no guarantee that there will be space for her once she gets there. Additionally, the shelters that are available generally only offer a spot for a limited amount of time, after which the woman must move on. These women may also have (a very legitimate) fear of a violent outburst from their partners in retaliation for their leaving, given the level of violence already present within the relationship. This fear is fully supported by the literature; often the most dangerous point in an abusive relationship is when the woman decides to leave (Oths & Robertson, 2007). Furthermore, a woman with children may also want to stay with her abusive partner because she wants to keep their family intact, fearing what may happen if she tried to survive on her own or wanting to keep a father figure in her children's life.

Psychologically, there are a number of reasons a woman might stay in an abusive relationship. A victim might feel compelled to remain in the relationship out of the affection and love she feels for her partner. Although on the surface this might not seem to be an adequate excuse for staying in a violent relationship, it is important to note that many relationships with domestic violence begin like most others: two individuals are brought together through attraction and a relationship is established through courtship and is built on mutual affection, attraction, and love (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Herman, 1992; Walker, 1979). In this way, these violent relationships, at least in the beginning stages, are very similar (if not indistinguishable) from those that do not contain violence. In fact, only a small percentage of victims in abusive relationships actually report

violence at its beginning stages (Walker, 1979). By the time the relationship is established, it may be too late for the victim to easily or safely leave the perpetrator.

Furthermore, a victim may not feel that her abuser is at fault for the violence. Research has shown that women who were living with abusive partners are very likely to blame themselves for the violence they have been subjected to (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Walker, 1979). In fact, the tendency of victims to defend even identify with the very people that cause them harm is a well-documented phenomenon. For example, Stockholm Syndrome, or “hostage syndrome”, was originally developed to describe individuals who identified with their captors in hostage situations and is a process that includes rationalizing the violence or minimizing the abusive experience by trying to see things from the perspective of the perpetrator (Graham, Rawlings, & Rimini, 1988; Lundberg-Love & Wilderson, 2006). This generally results in hostages or victims finding fault with their own actions and thus excusing and legitimizing the perpetrator’s violent behavior.

Although one may argue that Stockholm Syndrome may be the result of an abnormal, unique, and stressful situation, these same underlying forces may also be at work in a domestic setting. Even within family settings the same processes might be at work. After all, it is not uncommon for children to defend and even protect their abusive parents (Green, 1996). Like captives in a hostage situation, children who are dependent on the very person that is abusing them are stuck in a situation from which there is no escape. Women in situations of domestic violence can also find themselves in a similar position. Some of the women in domestic violence situations are, by chance or design,

economically dependent upon their abusive partner. The fewer financial resources a woman has in a relationship, the more dependent she is on her partner, and the more power her partner has (Anderson, 1997; Walker, 1979). Similarly, in an attempt to gain power, many batterers use fear to dominate their partners and destroy their autonomy (Anderson, 1997; Herman, 1992). In this way, women in domestic violence situations tend to resemble victims in hostage situations (Graham et al., 1988).

Even if victims of domestic violence have the capacity to physically escape their abusive partner, the alternatives may be unfavorable or even non-existent. Perhaps a woman's relationship with her abusive partner has truly destroyed other relationships with friends, eliminating possible social support. There is the possibility that her relationship with her partner resulted in her losing her job, or perhaps she was never employed, thus leaving her with few personal resources and little financial security beyond the support that she receives from her abusive partner.

If a victim resorts to identifying with her perpetrator, it could result in anticipating the abuse and possibly taking steps to lessen (but not necessarily avoid) the abuse or its impact. At the same time, these actions might cause victims to see the abusive situation from the perpetrator's perspective, reducing and even justifying the partner's violent behavior (Walker, 1979). Excusing or rationalizing the abuse may hinder any improvements in the relationship and may make the victim less willing to leave the abusive situation. Being able to take the perspective of her abusive partner may be beneficial temporarily, but may be harmful in the long run if a woman is unable to separate herself from her partner emotionally and physically. Notably, this sharing of

perspectives with a partner is the second element mentioned in the self-expansion model and is one of the foundations of self-other overlap (Aron et al., 1991).

The self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986) may also be valuable in explaining how violent relationships begin, because these relationships resemble non-violent ones in the earlier stages (Walker, 1979). However, the positive relationship characteristics associated with self-other overlap found in healthy relationships could potentially break down within an abusive environment. One does not necessarily want a close, intimate, and enduring relationship with someone who is physically abusive, and staying with an abusive partner may have negative consequences for the victim's physical safety in addition to well-being, resulting in lower levels of self-esteem (Lystad, Rice, & Kaplan, 1996).

Background Study

The majority of studies addressing the topic of self-other overlap have been done using college students; other potentially problematic relationships have not been explored. Simply being enrolled and actively taking classes in a university setting is not a luxury that all individuals enjoy, particularly those with unreliable incomes and sporadic living situations. In a study that was part of an undergraduate thesis, the role of self-other overlap in relationships was explored recruiting a sample of women in a domestic violence shelter who had recently ended their relationships with their abusive partners and were actively seeking services and support (Bell, 2009). Due to the fact that the majority of the research on self-other overlap in relationships has been conducted on relatively healthy relationships, Bell's (2009) study is unique in that it explores how

overlap, which is generally considered a benefit, may actually have negative implications when present in the aftermath of a violent and abusive relationship.

In line with research conducted by Myers and Hodges (in press), Bell's (2009) study conducted on formerly abused women revealed that the two measures of overlap (the IOS scale and the adjective checklist) were correlated with different outcomes, providing more evidence to support the idea that different measures of overlap might not be measuring the same thing. Within this sample, Bell found that the IOS scale was significantly correlated with abused women's intention to return to their former abusive partners (as measured by the Intent to Return Questionnaire; Stanley & Markman, 1992); the more self-other overlap as measured by the IOS, the greater the intent to have further interaction with the former partner.

For the other measures of self-other overlap, items from the adjective checklist were divided by valence (positive or negative), and the number of adjectives that the abused woman endorsed for both herself and her partner was computed. Percentages of positive or negative adjectives were the result of the number of positive (or negative) adjectives that a woman endorsed for both herself and her partner, divided by the total number of positive (or negative) adjectives a woman endorsed for herself. Using this method of computation, Bell found that women who had a higher percentage of positive adjectives in common with their former partners had lower levels of self-esteem. Conversely, those who indicated having a higher percentage of negative adjectives in common with their former partners indicated having higher levels of self-esteem.

Meanwhile, the alternative measure of self-other overlap (the IOS scale) was not correlated with self-esteem.

It was hypothesized that the latter results might be due to the fact that these women “lost” part of themselves (those characteristics) when they left their partner.² Those who considered themselves as sharing many positive characteristics with their partner may have seen themselves as leaving those qualities behind with their partners or, alternatively, may currently perceive those positive qualities as somehow being “tainted” or tied up with their abusive partners. Meanwhile, those who saw themselves as sharing many negative characteristics with their partner may have felt that they may have left behind those traits or moved beyond those negative qualities, thereby resulting in increased self-esteem. However, it is important to note that the participants did not appear to have completely “lost” these traits, because they did still label these traits as descriptive of themselves at the time of the study.

Overview of Current Study

Due to the difficulty of accessing a sample of domestic violence victims, Bell’s initial research was conducted on a small sample (N=21). The current study was able to add additional subjects to the earlier Bell sample, providing the opportunity to see if a larger sample would support previously observed effect sizes. Additionally, because no previous work addressed how self-esteem might be influenced by self-other overlap as measured by Davis et al.’s adjective checklist, it remains unclear which aspects of Bell’s

² Because all the participants were seeking services from a domestic violence shelter at the time of participating in the study, it can be safely assumed that all of these women left their partner and were actively taking steps to distance themselves from that abusive environment.

(2009) findings were unique to women who had just left abusive relationships. As a result, these findings could be driven by the experience of abuse, or might be the result of breaking up with a romantic partner. It also might be the case that these results are found in all relationships, including ones that are ongoing. In the conclusion of that study, it was clear that additional research with non-abused women as a comparison group was needed to investigate those possibilities and the current study was designed to explore these unanswered research questions.

In this study we seek to investigate the relationship between self-other overlap, self-esteem, and well-being. Additionally, we will be exploring whether there are particular relationship characteristics are driving the results; that is to say, whether the presence of abuse and relationship status can change the relationship between these variables. Three groups of participants were studied in an attempt to understand which relationship characteristics are driving these results. The first group was an expansion of the sample collected by Bell (2009) as part of her undergraduate thesis and was composed of a small number of women who recently left an abusive relationship and were currently seeking and/or utilizing services in a domestic violence shelter. We hypothesized that when a greater percentage of positive adjectives are shared between subjects and the former partner, participants will have lower levels of self-esteem and well-being and that in contrast, those with more negative adjectives in common with their former partners will show the opposite effect with higher levels of self-esteem and well-being. Due to the fact that the abused women are in a shelter suggesting that the separation is quite recent, they may still be actively working on establishing an identity

separate from that of their partner and may not yet be mentally separated from their former partners, it is predicted that these women still have much of their self-concept associated with their former partner. For the same reason, we also hypothesize that the formerly abused women who indicate having more self-other overlap as measured by the IOS will have higher depression scores and lower self-esteem and life satisfaction. The presence of abuse in these relationships may contribute to these detrimental effects because very important aspects of the relationship and the women's role in it may come to be defined by the abusive partner.

The second group consists of college students who have recently experienced a break up with a romantic partner. Similar to the sample of abused women, this group of participants is also expected to have low levels of self-esteem and higher depression scores with increased self-other overlap on the IOS, but to a lesser degree than the formerly abused women because the effect of abuse on mental health outcomes is likely to be absent, although participants were not selected on the basis of abuse history. We anticipate these negative effects will result due to the fact that breaking up with someone is often an unpleasant experience in general. Also, we anticipate this sample to have results similar to the domestic violence sample on the adjective checklist: We believe that self esteem might be enhanced due to shared negative adjectives, while self esteem might be lessened due to a sharing of positive adjectives. At the same time, due to the assumption that these relationships are not abusive in nature, we do not expect these results to be as strong as they would be in the sample of formerly abused women.

Our final sample consisted of college students currently in a romantic relationship. Within this group we predict results that are similar to the previous work that has been done on self-other overlap. That is to say, those who have higher levels of self-other overlap (as measured by the IOS) will have increased self-esteem and life satisfaction. Contrary to our other samples of individuals who are no longer in a romantic relationship, we anticipate that a high percentage of positive adjectives in common with their current partner will be associated with higher levels of self-esteem, while a high percentage of negative adjectives in common will be associated with lower levels of self-esteem. The reasoning for this hypothesis is that individuals who believe that they share a number of positive characteristics with their current partner might feel better about both themselves and their relationship.

CHAPTER II:

METHOD

Participants

Participants were drawn from two different populations; one group consisted of 31 participants who were women recruited from a women's shelter in Eugene, Oregon and the second consisted of 327 undergraduates who attended the University of Oregon. The majority of women who were recruited from the women's shelter (21 participants) were collected as part of an undergraduate thesis (Bell, 2009). For the purposes of this project, data from 10 additional women from that women's shelter were added. The average age of the participants from the shelter was 34 ($SD = 10.74$), with ages ranging from 18 to 62. Twenty-one of the women listed having at least some college, while nine listed having a high school diploma (or equivalent). One participant indicated never attending high school. Twenty-five participants were Caucasian, three identified as Native American and three identified as Hispanic.

Of the 327 student participants drawn from the university, 238 were female and 89 were male. All of the students participated in this study for partial fulfillment of course credit for classes in either the psychology or linguistics department. Using prescreening measures, participants were divided into one of two conditions depending

on their current relationship status. The first sample consisted of participants who were currently in a romantic relationship that had lasted for at least six months. Two-hundred and six participants met these requirements, and of these 154 participants were female and 54 were male. The majority of these participants identified as Caucasian (79.5%) with Asian (6.2%) and Hispanic (3.8%) populations as the largest minorities. Another 6.6% participants identified as “other,” which was composed of the greatest number of participants after Caucasians, and most of this group reported being biracial. Within this student population, participants were involved in relationships that had lasted for an average of 26.33 months (a little over 2 years). The second student sample consisted of 121 participants who had been involved in a relationship that had lasted for at least six months, but that relationship had ended within four months of participation in this study. Because they were drawn from the same sample, these participants likely had ethnic backgrounds that were similar to the previous student sample and were on average 19.6 years old, with ages ranging from 17 to 31. On average, these subjects had been involved with their former partners for a little under two years (22.45 months) prior to their break up.

Procedure

Regardless of condition, all student participants recruited from the university completed the study online, at their convenience, and on a computer of their choosing. The questionnaire took approximately thirty minutes to complete and all participants were compensated with half a research credit for their time. After the student subjects read through the online consent form and agreed to participate, they then continued on to

the online questionnaire and were always given the option to stop participation in the study at any time. Upon completion of the study all participants were provided a copy of the debriefing form that they could then print out.

The study procedures for the sample of women living in the shelter differed from the student samples in that instead of filling out the questionnaire electronically, a hard copy was provided to each of the participants by counselors or group coordinators at the women's shelter. Due to the presence of abuse and tendency for longer relationships, a number of additional elements were assessed within this sample. Due to the increased length of the questionnaire, participants were given an hour for completion.

The administration of the questionnaire for the formerly abused women also differed from the student sample in that study materials were directly administered. Before beginning the study, these women were given a tacit consent form and gave their consent to participate, but no written signatures were collected. This tacit consent was used in order to protect the safety and confidentiality of our participants, and at no point in the study was any identifying information collected. It was explained to potential participants that they were under no obligation to participate in this study and that the decision to participate (or not) would in no way influence their relationship with the shelter.

After completing their questionnaires, participants placed them in an envelope, sealed it, and gave it back to the counselors and group coordinators. In this way participants never directly contacted the researchers and confidentiality could be maintained. Upon receiving these sealed questionnaires, the counselors and group

coordinators then gave these participants a debriefing form that explained the background and purpose of the study as well as additional community resources that could provide support if it was needed.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire. All participants, regardless of condition, began the questionnaire by answering basic demographic information (sex, age, ethnicity, etc.) and general relationship questions (such as length of the relationship). The wording of the relationship questions in this and subsequent questionnaires were slightly altered to be specific to the sample; for example, those currently in a relationship were asked questions about their “current partner,” those recently broken up were asked about their “former partner,” while women in the shelter were asked about their “former abusive partner.” All participants received the following measures regardless of condition. Additional questions were included for both the break up and domestic violence samples.

Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale. Participants completed the modified version of the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), indicating how they felt to their partner by circling which of seven pairs of increasingly overlapping circles best represented their relationship. One of the circles represented the self and the second represented a specific other. Two versions of this scale were included in the questionnaire: one asked participants to indicate which pair of circles best described the closest they ever felt to their partner, the second asked participants to mark how close they currently felt to their partner. In the sample of college students currently in a relationship, participants were instructed to respond according to how they felt about their current partner; in both the

sample of students who had recently been in a break up and the sample of formerly abused women, participants responded according to how they felt about their former partner.

Adjective Checklist. A shortened version of the adjective checklist (Davis et al., 1996) was also administered. Participants were provided with two identical lists of 100 adjectives from which the participants first selected adjectives that were descriptive of themselves and then selected adjectives that were descriptive of their partners.³ The amount of adjectives that were in common is a measure of the amount of overlap that exists between partners. Adjectives were listed alphabetically and differed in terms of valence. Some of the listed words had a negative valence (e.g. “rude” or “irritable”), some were neutral (e.g. “deliberate” or “carefree”) and others were positive (e.g. “clever” or “friendly”). For analyses, words were separated into groups depending on valence.

Self-Esteem. Participants were also given the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. This measure consisted of ten questions that asked participants to respond to statements such as “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” Responses to these statements ranged from 1 “strongly agree” to 4 “strongly disagree.” Higher scores on this measure indicate higher levels of self-esteem. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .79.

Well-Being. A measure developed by Diener, Emmons, Laresen, and Griffen (1985) to assess well-being was also included. Participants were provided five statements that included “in ways my life is close to my ideal” and “so far I have gotten

³ The Relational Health Indices peer scale (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan, & Miller, 2002) was included after the adjective checklist, which sought to evaluate the extent to which individuals had friends they could turn to for support. However this scale will not be discussed in this thesis.

the important things I want in life.” Responses ranged from 1 “the statement is not at all characteristic of me” to 5 “the statement is extremely characteristic of me.” Lower scores on this scale were indicative of higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction. The reported Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .87.

Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). The 20-item depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was also included. Participants were asked to indicate how often they experienced a series of events (e.g. “I had crying spells” or “I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor”) over the course of the past week. Responses ranged from 1 “rarely or none of the time (less than one day)” to 4 “most or all of the time (5-7 days),”⁴ and higher scores demonstrated more depressive tendencies. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale within a sample of individuals from the general population was .85. This scale has also been used to measure depression within samples of abused women in the previous studies (Walker, 2009).

Additional questions and measures for specific conditions

Not all measures could be given to all participants due to the differences in relationship status. Those who were no longer in a relationship with their romantic partner (both the break up and domestic violence condition) were provided with additional measures to assess the former relationship and current feelings about the former partner. Both samples of participants were asked who ended the relationship and

⁴ After the CES-D the Relational Health Indices community scale was included (Lang et al. 2002) which assessed community support, but the results will not be discussed in this thesis. The Silencing the Self Scale (Jack, 1991), and the Revised Unmitigated Communion Scale (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998) were also included to evaluate what, if anything, was lost in the relationship. These scales will not be analyzed for this paper.

indicated how upset they were by the breakup. Women in the domestic violence sample were also asked additional questions, such as the degree to which they were financially independent and whether they had children.

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale 12-item scale. The TRIM-12, (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998)⁵ was also administered, which measures several key components of forgiveness: low desire for revenge and low motivation for avoidance. Higher scores on the TRIM indicated more vindictive feelings while lower scores were correlated with greater amounts of forgiveness toward their former partner. Participants were asked to respond to statements such as “I’m going to get even” and “I want to see him/her hurt and miserable” and “I wish something bad would happen to him/her.” Responses could range from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” and were intended to assess participants’ current feelings about his or her former partner.

⁵ The State Forgiveness measure (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998) was also administered. The Unattractiveness of Alternatives measure and Termination Procedures measure, both slightly modified from Stanley and Markman (1992) along with the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), but none of these measures will be analyzed in this paper.

CHAPTER III:

RESULTS

In the honor's thesis conducted by Bell (2009), correlational analyses was run to evaluate the relations between our measures of self-other overlap (IOS scales and the adjective checklist), measures of well-being (depression, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction), and forgiveness in our sample of formerly abused women. Within that earlier study, the IOS scales were not correlated with any of our measures of well-being but the adjective checklist, broken down by valence, was correlated with self-esteem.

In the first stage of the current study, we were interested in whether the results of that earlier study would hold up in a larger sample of participants. Prior to examining the relationship between self-other overlap and well-being, the interaction between groups and self-other overlap ("IOS ever" and positive overlap) will be explored to identify whether there are underlying differences between groups on this measure. Analysis revealed a significant interaction between the group of formerly abused women and college students that had recently broken up with their romantic partner on the measure of overlap: $R^2 = .133$, $F(3,363) = 37.34$, $p=.033$. Breakdown of this interaction by group showed a significant positive correlation between the self-other overlap measure and positive overlap, but only for the group of college students that had recently broken up

with their romantic partner. None of the other interactions between groups were significant. Due to the fact that there seems to be different relationships between the variables within each of our groups, further analysis is needed to further evaluate the nature of the relationship between our measures. To do this, hierarchical linear regression was utilized to examine whether the amount of variance within our well-being measures (self-esteem, depression, and life satisfaction) could be accounted for by our various measures of self-other overlap.

The results of this analysis showed that 27.1% of the variance in self-esteem was predicted by a marginally significant model that included percentage positive overlap, percentage negative overlap, and the amount of self-other overlap that the women reported feeling at any point in the relationship (“IOS ever”), $F(3,23)=2.84, p=.060$. Further investigation of the standardized regression coefficients revealed that percentage of positive adjectives was a marginally negative predictor of self esteem, $\beta = -.35, t(26) = -1.94, p = .064$, while percentage of negative adjectives was a marginally positive predictor of self-esteem, $\beta = .36, t(26) = 1.91, p = .069$. In other words, women who indicate having more negative adjectives shared with their former partners have higher self-esteem and those who perceive themselves as sharing more positive adjectives with their former partner have lower levels of self-esteem. These results are similar to those of the earlier study, however within this larger sample self-other overlap was a marginal, rather than significant, predictor of self-esteem.

These same measures of self-other overlap (percentage positive overlap, percentage negative overlap, and “IOS ever”) were also used to predict depression but

they did not explain a significant proportion of the variance, $R^2=.068$, $F(3,23) = .56$, $p=.64$. However, these measures were shown to explain a marginally significant amount of variance within life satisfaction scores: $R^2=.236$, $F(3,23)=2.36$, $p=.097$. For life satisfaction, “IOS ever” was the only significant predictor, and it was negatively related to life satisfaction scores, $\beta = -.486$, $t(26) = -2.54$, $p=.018$. Individuals who perceived themselves as overlapping more at any time in their relationship with their former partner tended to have lower levels of life satisfaction.

The same regression analysis was then run on the two student samples (the one consisting of students who had just broken up with their former partner and the other consisting of students currently in a romantic relationship) to evaluate the nature of their relationships. Within the sample of students who had recently broken up with a romantic partner, our model of self-other overlap that consisted of “IOS ever” scores, percentage positive overlap and percentage negative overlap did not explain a significant proportion of the variance for any of the well-being outcome variables (self-esteem: $R^2=.010$, $F(3,89)=.29$, $p=.83$; depression: $R^2=.018$, $F(3,89)=.58$, $p=.64$; life satisfaction: $R^2=.029$, $F(3,89)=1.76$, $p=.16$). Next, we ran the same regression analysis on our sample of student currently in a romantic relationship. Although the three overlap measures did not significantly predict self-esteem ($R^2=.028$, $F(3,179)=1.73$, $p=.16$ or depression ($R^2=.020$, $F(3,179)=1.19$, $p=.32$), the model was significant for life satisfaction, $R^2=.068$, $F(3,179)=4.25$, $p=.006$. Looking at our standardized coefficients, “IOS ever” was a marginal predictor, $\beta=.130$, $t(178)=1.72$, $p=.086$, and percentage of positive overlap was

a significant predictor of life satisfaction, $\beta=.189$, $t(178)=2.47$, $p = .015$. Negative overlap was not a significant predictor, $\beta=.024$, $t(178)=.32$, $p=.75$.

Thus, when the abused women indicated more overlap with their partners at some point during the relationship (“IOS ever”), they had marginally less life satisfaction. However, as predicted, among the college students currently in relationships, rather than decreasing life satisfaction, overlap as measured by “IOS ever” actually was related to increased life satisfaction. Within the sample of individuals in current relationships, percentage of positive overlap was linked to positive self-esteem, while percentage of negative overlap was not significant. Looking at our sample of students who had recently broken up with their partner, none of our measures of self-other overlap were related to self-esteem. In the case of abused women, the percentage of positive overlap (as measured by the adjective checklist) was a marginal negative predictor of self-esteem while the percentage of negative overlap was a marginal positive predictor of self-esteem.

In both the student breakup and domestic violence sample we also examined how these individuals felt about their ex-partners. After running another regression, our three measurements of self-other overlap (“IOS ever”, percentage of positive overlap, and percentage of negative overlap) accounted for a significant proportion of variance within the TRIM in the student break up sample, $R^2=.100$, $F(1,107)=3.96$, $p=.01$. However, the strength of this model seems to be primarily driven by the percentage of positive adjectives, since it was the only significant predictor, $\beta= -.319$, $t(107)= -3.26$, $p=.002$. In other words, the more student participants overlapped with former partners on positive adjectives, the less bitterness they felt towards them. In the domestic violence sample,

the overall model, including the three measures of self-other overlap, did not account for a significant proportion of the variance within the TRIM scores, $R^2=.009$, $F(1,27)=.248$, $p=.62$, and none of the measures were significant on their own. In sum, TRIM scores seemed to be largely unrelated to self-other overlap measures within the domestic violence sample. It is also worth noting that TRIM scores also seemed to be lower among those in the student breakup sample ($M=2.25$, $SD=.69$) compared to domestic violence sample ($M=3.51$, $SD=.70$), suggesting abused women felt more ill will towards their ex-partners than the college students.

CHAPTER IV:

DISCUSSION

This study sought to achieve two goals: first, to evaluate whether the results discovered in the earlier study (Bell, 2009) would be replicated using a larger sample size, and second to assess whether the patterns that were previously found were a characteristic of all relationships, relationships that have recently ended, or were specifically applicable in the aftermath of relationships that are abusive in nature. Similar to the earlier study conducted by Bell (2009), within our larger sample of abused women it was hypothesized that participants who had a greater percentage of overlap on negative adjectives with their former partner would have higher self-esteem, while those who had a greater percentage of overlap on positive adjectives would have lower self-esteem. Additionally, it was hypothesized that the results from student participants that had recently ended their relationship would mirror the results the results found for the formerly abused women sample because both involved individuals in the aftermath of a breakup, but it was further hypothesized the nature of the relationship between self-other overlap and self-esteem would not be as strong in the student sample. The reasoning for this prediction is that the presence of abuse might lead to more self-other overlap simply as a result of the nature of that abuse, and that fewer of our student participants are likely

to be involved in similarly abusive relationships. Among those in current relationships and who are likely to be enjoying the benefits of a close, supportive relationship, we predicted that having more self-other overlap would enhance self-esteem and well-being. We also believed that self-esteem would be influenced in the opposite direction as the previous two samples: Having a higher percentage of positive adjectives would enhance self-esteem, while having a higher percentage of negative adjectives would decrease self-esteem.

Our results only partially supported our hypotheses. As predicted, self-other overlap (as measured by the adjective checklist) seemed to be closely tied to self-esteem in our sample of abused women and students in a relationship, but the direction of this relationship between self-other overlap and self-esteem was different depending on our samples. Contrary to our predictions, analysis on the sample of students that had recently experienced a break up revealed no connection between self-esteem and shared adjectives. A consequence of these differing findings is that measures of self-other overlap appear to be related to self-esteem and several other measures in different ways, and that this relationship is largely determined by which type of measure of self-other overlap is used and in what sample. This provides some support to the idea that different measures of self-other overlap may actually be measuring different things (Myers & Hodges, in press).

Women from abusive relationships who indicated having higher percentages of overlapping positive adjectives with their former partners had lower levels of self-esteem, while those who shared more negative adjectives with their former partners had higher

levels of self-esteem. Even though the direction of these findings is identical to the earlier results, the significance for these relationships dropped from significant to marginally significant. This larger sample size also yielded a result that was not present in the earlier, smaller sample: Women who reported higher levels of self-other overlap at any time in their relationship (as measured by our “IOS ever” scale) indicated having lower levels of life satisfaction. In other words, the women who indicated having high levels of self-other overlap at some point in their relationships with their former partners were less satisfied with their current life.

This connection between adjective overlap and self-esteem could be an indication that the loss of a close relationship may be seen as a partial loss of these shared characteristics. If a participant sees herself as being immature for example, perhaps she feels less so after her relationship with her similarly immature partner has ended. In a sense, the participant’s own negative traits may appear to have lessened in the absence of her partner. At the same time, the absence of a partner may make a participant feel like she has less of a positive trait (e.g., less sociable) after the relationship has ended if the partner is perceived to have “taken” those shared positive traits with him. It may be that these positive characteristics are most apparent when in the presence of the ex-partner, and in his absence those characteristics are less evident. Maybe these individuals once thought of themselves as being more sociable, for example, but in the partner’s absence they are unsure if that is really descriptive of themselves or was just an extension of their partner. Regardless of the motivation, it is important to keep in mind that the participants

did not appear to have totally lost these traits because they did still label these traits as being descriptive of themselves.

Although the perceived loss of positive traits and the lessening of negative traits may be a possible explanation for what happens in the aftermath of abusive relationships, it does not necessarily explain what happens in the aftermath of relationships that are not abusive. Within our sample of students who had just broken up with a romantic partner, none of the measures of self-other overlap (“IOS current” or “IOS ever”) were related to self-esteem, depression, or life-satisfaction. Interestingly, none of the patterns that appeared in the sample of abused women appeared in this sample, although both had just undergone a separation from their romantic partners. This result suggests that one possible factor that played a role in the patterns observed in the domestic violence sample may be the abuse these women experienced (although it is important to note that we did not assess whether abuse was present in the student breakup sample). Additionally, because the domestic violence sample was all women and our student breakup sample included men, these results might be influenced by a variety of different factors such as gender, age, or even socioeconomic status, to name a few. Finally, the relationships in the domestic violence sample were generally longer term than the relationships that the students were in and probably involved a greater amount of interdependence with their partners (e.g., children, financial interdependence, and joint home ownership). However, regardless of these potential factors one thing was clear: There was something unique about the domestic violence sample that was driving these effects and further research is necessary to identify what led to these results within this sample.

Finally, the students who indicated having a higher percentage of positive adjectives in common with their current partner had higher levels of self-esteem. This stands in stark contrast to the results among abused women: In that sample, women who had higher levels of self-other overlap as measured by the amount of self-other overlap ever experienced in the relationship (“IOS ever”) had lower levels of self-esteem and those with a high percentage of positive adjectives in common with their former partners had lower levels of self-esteem. Within the current study of students in relationships, we had predicted that the percentage of shared negative adjectives would be related to lower self-esteem, but the percentage of shared negative adjectives unexpectedly did not appear to be related to self-esteem among the students who were currently in relationships.

Our investigation of students currently in romantic relationships revealed relationships among many of our measures of self-esteem and well-being that were opposite to what was found for the sample of abused women. Those students who indicated having a higher percentage of positive adjectives in common with their current partners were shown to have higher levels of self-esteem. Sharing positive things in common with one’s current partner apparently predicts beneficial outcomes for one’s self-esteem, but self-esteem was unaffected by the percentage of overlapping negative adjectives. Additionally, students currently in a relationship who reported higher levels of self-other overlap at any time in the relationship (as measured by the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale) had higher levels of self-esteem.

The results of this study also suggest that expanding the use of adjective checklist by using it to assess the amount of overlap within close relationships may provide new

information on the nature of relationships and break-ups. People that perceive more overlap with their partner may feel worse or better about themselves based on what characteristics they perceive themselves sharing with their romantic partner and other characteristics of the relationship they are in. Having overlap (as measured by the percentage of shared positive adjectives using the adjective checklist and “IOS scale”) appears to be generally beneficial in ongoing relationships and irrelevant to recent break-ups among college students.

Conclusion

Collectively, the results of this study reinforce the unusual nature of abusive relationships. Unlike women with histories of domestic abuse, the self-esteem and life satisfaction of undergraduate students was not related to the extent or nature of self-other overlap they felt with their former partners, indicating that these results may be driven by something unique within the abusive relationships. It is also important to bear in mind that the community sample of women in the domestic violence shelter also tended to have longer relationships with their partners, so the results might also be related to the amount of time that these individuals spent with their partners. Having spent more time with their partners there is more opportunity to develop a life together, one with shared resources and responsibilities and greater interdependence. However, even with this in mind it is important to remember that previous research has shown that self-other overlap is largely a positive thing to have in close relationships while the current research provides support that this may not be entirely the case. If one’s partner is abusive and violent, there may, in fact, be negative consequences to this overlap. Based on these

results, it may be the case that being able to evaluate the extent of the connection between the women and her former partner may be an important component when providing aid and support to victims of domestic violence after an in the aftermath of an abusive relationship. This knowledge may allow counselors to tailor interventions in ways that will be both effective and meaningful and help predict or reduce the likelihood of returning to an abusive relationship. Additionally, these results are particularly promising for understanding the unique challenges of this vulnerable population.

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