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# Self-Determination as Growth Motivation in Romantic Relationships

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*Self-determination theory was applied to coping, emotion, and behavior in romantic relationships. Sixty heterosexual couples were videotaped in a semistructured interview designed to emphasize differences in how partners view the relationship. Multilevel analyses revealed support for several hypotheses. First, controlled orientation was associated with rating an ideal partner according to how one views oneself, whereas this was weaker with autonomy. Second, autonomy orientation was associated with more relationship-maintaining coping strategies, whereas controlled orientation was associated with more denial. Finally, during the discussion, autonomy orientation was associated with less negative emotion and more positive behaviors, whereas controlled orientation was associated with fewer positive behaviors. The findings are discussed in terms of the benefits of a general motivation toward growth in relationships.*

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Happiness is not a state to arrive at but a manner of traveling.

—Margaret Lee Runbeck

Romantic relationships are often characterized by changes and challenges. How partners recognize, interpret, and attempt to cope with these events can determine whether partners persist at or give up on the relationship. In other words, how partners orient toward relationship challenges, seeing them as opportunities for improving the relationship rather than indications of a bad investment, may influence how they subsequently think, feel, and behave in the relationship. Indeed, recent empirical research underscores the importance of construing relationship challenges as potential for growth (Knee, 1998; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neigh-

bors, & Patrick, 2001; Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, & Saleh, 1986; Sprecher, 1999). Research in other domains also has demonstrated the benefits of viewing challenges as opportunities for improvement. For example, research in the achievement and social cognition literatures has shown that a similar orientation toward improvement is linked with persistence in the face of challenges and an emphasis on learning and mastery (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994).

A variety of theories view romantic relationships from a growth perspective (Aron & Aron, 1986; Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Knee et al., 2001). For example, self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) proposes that people are motivated to expand and develop their resources, perspectives, and characteristics by including the other person within the self. Within the context of this perspective, growth is defined as the elaboration of self as

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partners become close. Another perspective on growth in relationships has focused on individuals' implicit theories of relationships and the consequences of believing in growth and improvement (Knee, 1998). For example, when individuals believe that relationships are characterized by growth, they are more likely to adopt active, open coping strategies and are more accepting of a partner's less-than-ideal qualities (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2001).

Whereas self-expansion theory and implicit theories of relationships address individuals' relationship experiences, growth motivation has been examined in other domains as well. In particular, Deci and Ryan's (1985b, 1991) self-determination theory has shown that interpreting potentially stressful and threatening events as challenges has considerable benefits for a variety of domains. For instance, research has shown that an orientation toward growth and mastery can positively influence academic achievement (e.g., Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994), both physical and mental health (e.g., Ryan, Plant, & O'Malley, 1995; Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996), and interpersonal behavior (e.g., Blais et al., 1990; Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996).

Although self-determination theory has received considerable attention in a variety of domains, its relevance to personal relationships, romantic relationships in particular, has barely been explored (for exception, see Blais et al., 1990). Further examination of self-determination in romantic relationships is important because the kind of motivational and cognitive processes that are affected by self-determination are precisely those that may be key to relationship maintenance processes. Self-determination may manifest itself in relationships as growth motivation and thus may be an important element in persistence and openness to the changes and challenges of one's daily romantic life.

#### *Self-Determined Motivation*

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1991) broadly describes motivation along a continuum, ranging from behaviors that originate from oneself choicefully and openly (autonomous behaviors) to behaviors that are coerced by others or motivated by pressures and expectations to perform (controlled behaviors). For example, offering supportive comments to one's partner when he or she complains about his or her tiresome day would be considered autonomous if one were truly feeling supportive, empathic, and accommodating. This same behavior would be considered controlled if it were conducted merely out of felt obligation or the desire to avoid a blowup. Autonomous behaviors tend to reflect growth motivation in that they are characterized by openness to feedback and desire for improve-

ment and mastery, whereas controlled behaviors tend to reflect ego motivation in that they are characterized by viewing feedback as threatening, defending one's ego, and being dishonest with oneself and others (Hodgins & Knee, in press).

Investigators have operationalized autonomous and controlled motivation in various ways, including the types of aspirations that individuals endorse (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996), coercive elements of the social context (Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982; Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983), self-reported reasons for engaging in various behaviors (Vallerand & Bissonette, 1992; Vallerand, Blais, Briere, & Pelletier, 1989), and individual differences in motivational orientations (Deci & Ryan, 1985a; Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996; Knee & Zuckerman, 1996, 1998). In the present research, we chose to focus on individual differences in motivational orientations. This notion of orientations evolved from the assumption that people differ in the extent to which they regulate their behavior based on autonomy and choice or based on (either real or imagined) pressures to perform (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). Accordingly, Deci and Ryan (1985a) developed a general measure of causality orientations that assesses the degree to which an individual is oriented toward autonomy and being controlled. These orientations, as measured intrapersonally, are independent ( $r = .03$ ) (Deci & Ryan, 1985a) because everyone is to some extent motivated by both interest and pressure.

An autonomy orientation is considered an orientation toward choice, interest, and growth both in oneself and in others. In this sense, it reflects a general motivation for growth and mastery. This kind of growth orientation has clearly been linked to beneficial outcomes outside the relationship domain (Deci & Ryan, 1985a; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Koestner, Bernieri, & Zuckerman, 1992; Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994). In the context of close relationships, such an orientation is likely to be positively associated with relationship development. Accordingly, these individuals may be more open to engaging in discussions about relationship problems. They may, in turn, feel more positive after such interactions because these instances are not perceived as threatening to the relationship. A growth orientation toward relationships also suggests that these individuals may be more likely to acknowledge problems and conflicts when they arise because they do not feel as ego-involved with or threatened by relationship problems. Thus, they may be more likely to engage in more active relationship-maintenance strategies than their less-growth-motivated counterparts. Finally, in addition to its association with performing certain types of behaviors, autonomy orientation also is linked with supporting autonomy in others (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Hodgins &

Knee, in press). Thus, autonomy orientation is likely to be associated with more positive, generally supportive behaviors in interpersonal contexts, such as listening carefully to one's partner and attempting to understand and respect the partner's different points of view.

The other dimension of the general causality orientations scale is termed controlled orientation and reflects a general tendency to become ego-involved in one's daily experiences (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Koestner et al., 1992; Scherhorn & Grunert, 1988). In the relationships domain, controlled orientation is likely to manifest itself in a more ego-involved stance with regard to relationship development. Thus, when dealing with relationship problems, these individuals may be more likely to view problems in the relationship as a reflection on themselves or as their partner finding fault with their feelings and actions. They are likely to respond more ego-defensively and as a result they are likely to feel less positive after such interactions. In an effort to protect themselves from these negatively perceived encounters, those who are more controlled may deny relationship problems when they objectively exist or may simply avoid discussions of relationship problems by tactics such as changing the subject or avoiding their partner altogether.

More recent research has linked motivational orientations to emotional regulation and esteem-maintenance strategies. Knee and Zuckerman (1996, 1998) found that growth-motivated individuals (those higher in autonomy orientation and lower in controlled orientation) engaged in fewer self-enhancing attributions after success, fewer defensive attributions after failure, and fewer defensive coping strategies compared to all other participants. Thus, growth-motivated individuals might be expected to engage in fewer self-serving tendencies in relationships, leaning more toward authentic and veridical perception, cognition, and behavior than their ego-motivated counterparts. When motivated by growth, one might view a romantic partner's different perspective as interesting rather than threatening and as an opportunity for increased closeness and understanding rather than a reflection of fundamental differences.

These esteem maintenance processes also may be evident in the qualities one desires in an ideal partner. People who are ego-involved are more easily influenced by fluctuations in self-esteem, and although they may be especially likely to inflate their self-views in a positive direction (e.g., Knee & Zuckerman, 1996), they may be equally likely to be as far off in the negative direction. Thus, what ego-involved people tend to feel they deserve in an ideal partner may be based almost entirely on how they view themselves. If they have a positive self-view, they may be likely to seek more positive qualities in an ideal partner. If they have a negative self-view, they may be likely to feel less deserving of a high-quality partner and

rate their views of an ideal partner accordingly. In this way, individuals who are less self-determined may be ego-involved when it comes to rating the qualities they desire in an ideal partner. In contrast, those who are growth motivated tend to have a more stable self-view (Deci & Ryan, 1995) and are less likely to engage in esteem-maintenance strategies (Hodgins & Knee, in press). Accordingly, they tend to have less extreme fluctuations in self-views. Moreover, their general perceptions are not as easily influenced by their self-views. Thus, what they desire in an ideal partner may not vary as a function of how they view themselves. In fact, given how they tend to support autonomy and growth in others as well, they may tend to view differences as novel and interesting and embrace these differences in potential romantic partners.

Finally, motivational orientations, controlled orientation in particular, have been linked to defensive interpersonal behavior as well. Knee, Neighbors, and Viator (2001) found that controlled orientation was associated with feeling more anger while driving and in turn responding more aggressively to other drivers' gestures and maneuvers. In this way, ego-involved individuals tend to interpret others' behavior as directed at them personally. Within close relationships, this ego-involved interpersonal style may be evident in a more hostile approach to dealing with conflicts and differences of opinion. Just as these controlled individuals experience more anger while driving, they also may experience more anger when discussing relationship problems.

#### *Self-Determination in Relationships*

As noted above, self-determination is associated with more positive, open, and honest social interaction and less use of strategies that defend self-esteem. It would seem that these tendencies toward authentic social perception and interaction could have important consequences in the context of romantic relationships. Some evidence already suggests that self-determined motivation is associated with beneficial relationship outcomes (Blais et al., 1990; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; C. Seligman, Fazio, & Zanna, 1980). Specifically, couples who are motivated to be in the relationship for its own sake, rather than to obtain extrinsic incentives or avoid negative consequences, reported greater feelings of love and faith in the relationship (Rempel et al., 1985; C. Seligman et al., 1980). When self-determined, partners may view relationship problems more as challenges than as hassles and may be less stressed by those events (Blais et al., 1990; Hodgins & Knee, in press). Along these lines, the most comprehensive study thus far of self-determined motivation in relationships found that the more self-determined both partners' motivational style, the greater their perceptions of adaptive couple behav-

iors, which in turn strongly predicted their personal happiness with the relationship (Blais et al., 1990).

In addition to a more open and nondefensive orientation toward others, growth motivation also may make one feel less threatened by differences and disagreements in that one views these events as challenges and opportunities for increased understanding and closeness (Hodgins & Knee, in press). When one is motivated toward improvement and the support of autonomy in others, conflicts and differences in perspective become opportunities for learning and development rather than threats to one's ego. In romantic relationships, this may imply that self-determination is related to an openness and acceptance of differences, whether those differences come in the form of the qualities one seeks in an ideal partner or one's current partner's different perceptions and expectations of the relationship. When motivated by growth, one tends to embrace rather than attack differences in others and one is less likely to judge others through one's own eyes (i.e., expecting others to be just like oneself). In contrast, when one is ego-involved, judging others through one's own eyes may be second nature. Thus, an ego-involved individual may be more likely to expect the ideal partner to be exactly like themselves. Moreover, because growth and ego motivations may affect what one ideally seeks in a romantic partner, these motivations also may influence how people cope, feel, and behave in their own relationships.

#### *The Present Study*

The present study involved couples who engaged in a videotaped, semistructured interview designed to emphasize differences in how they view the relationship. Motivation orientation was reported before the interview, along with coping strategies and perceptions of oneself and one's ideal partner. Current emotion was reported both before and after the interview. The following were hypothesized:

*Hypothesis 1:* Those who are higher on autonomy orientation (i.e., more growth motivated) would be less likely to rate an ideal partner as a function of how they view themselves. Those who are higher on controlled orientation (i.e., more ego-involved) would be more likely to rate an ideal partner as a function of how they view themselves.

*Hypothesis 2:* Autonomy orientation would be associated with more active relationship-maintenance coping strategies. Controlled orientation would be associated with more denial and avoidance coping strategies.

*Hypothesis 3:* Autonomy orientation would be associated with increased positive and decreased negative emotion as a function of discussing discrepant views of the relationship with one's partner. Controlled orientation would be associated with decreased positive and increased negative emotion.

*Hypothesis 4:* Autonomy orientation would be associated with more positive, supportive behaviors and fewer negative behaviors while discussing discrepant views with one's partner. Controlled orientation would be associated with more negative and fewer positive behaviors.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were 61 heterosexual couples ranging in age from 18 to 40 ( $M = 21$ ,  $SD = 3.91$ ). They were recruited through flyers and advertisements circulated on and near a large urban university campus and were paid \$40 (\$20 per person) for participation. Partners had been in the relationship between 14 days and 12 years ( $M = 2$  years,  $SD = 2.2$  years). The sample was ethnically diverse with 46% Caucasian, 20% Asian, 16% Hispanic, 8% African American, and 10% who chose "other." The average annual household income was between \$40,000 and \$49,999 and the majority of couples were single and not living together (70%).<sup>1</sup>

### *Procedure*

The 2-hour session was divided into two phases. Participants were told that they would be videotaped first individually and then with their partner while discussing their relationship. In Phase 1, partners completed a battery of questionnaires in a Latin square design to measure their motivation orientations, coping strategies, and their perceptions of themselves and their partner. In Phase 2, participants were videotaped during a sequence of semistructured interviews about their relationship. Participants were first videotaped individually for 5 minutes and then with their partner for 10 minutes. The individual interviews were used to gather information that could indicate differences in how partners viewed the relationship as well as gather baseline behavioral data for how comfortable they were being videotaped. In the individual interview, participants were specifically asked if there was anything they had mentioned that they did not want their partner to know. In the couple interview, partners were given the opportunity to discuss differences in their answers and come to some mutual agreement.

### *Measures*

*Motivational orientations.* A revised version of the General Causality Orientation Scale (GCOS) (Deci & Ryan, 1985a) was incorporated. The original GCOS consisted of 12 scenarios, 8 of which were achievement related. The revised scale employed here was an expanded version that included an additional 5 scenarios that were explicitly interpersonal (Hodgins, Koestner, et al., 1996). Each of the 17 scenarios is followed by a controlled



orientation response and an autonomy orientation response. The respondent rates both responses on a 7-point scale of how characteristic it would be of him or her. For example, a scenario and its autonomy and controlled responses are as follows:

Your friend has a habit that annoys you to the point of making you angry. It is likely that you would, "Try to understand why your friend does it and why it is so upsetting for you" (autonomy orientation). "Point it out each time you notice it, that way maybe he (she) will stop doing it" (controlled orientation).

Participants rate each response on a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). Scores are computed by averaging respondents' ratings across all 17 scenarios, keeping autonomy and controlled scores independent. As usual, autonomy and controlled orientations were largely independent in this study ( $r = .17$ ). Internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) in this study were .83 and .79 for autonomy and controlled orientations, respectively.

*Perceptions of self and ideal partner.* The Interpersonal Qualities Scale (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996) consists of 21 positive and negative attributes that reflect virtues (e.g., understanding) and faults (e.g., critical and judgmental). Participants rated how well each of the traits described themselves and their ideal partner on 9-point scales (1 = *not at all characteristic*, 9 = *completely characteristic*). The order of the attribute ratings for the different targets was counterbalanced across participants to distribute potential order effects. Scores were derived for the total index (reversing the negative items). Higher scores reflect a more positive view. Reliabilities were .77 and .79 for ratings of self and ideal partner, respectively.

*Coping strategies.* Coping with stressful relationship events was measured by the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). The COPE incorporates a wide variety of conceptually distinct coping strategies, each assessed by a 4-item subscale. The strategies represent various types of problem-focused coping (e.g., active coping, "I concentrate my efforts on doing something about it"; planning, "I make a plan of action"), support-seeking (e.g., "I discuss my feelings with someone"), and emotion-focused coping, including strategies that may be viewed as adaptive (e.g., positive reinterpretation and growth, "I try to grow as a person as a result of the experience"), and avoidant (e.g., denial, "I pretend as though it hasn't even happened"; mental disengagement, "I turn to work or other substitute activities to take my mind off things"; behavioral disengagement, "I reduce the amount of effort I'm putting into solving the problem"). Participants responded according to what they typically do and

feel when they disagree or have an argument with their romantic partner. Response choices ranged from 1 (*I usually don't do this at all*) to 4 (*I usually do this a lot*). Excluding mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement, acceptance, and active coping, Cronbach's alphas ranged from .71 to .93. Cronbach's alphas for the former were lower and ranged from .50 to .58. One reason for these lower reliabilities, according to Carver et al. (1989), is that the items for mental and behavioral disengagement describe very different methods of disengagement (e.g., sleeping vs. watching TV), although this would not account for active coping and acceptance.

*Current emotion.* Current emotion was measured both before and after the interview using a brief version of the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (MAACL) (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965) with instructions explicitly asking participants how they "feel about their relationship at this very moment." The shortened MAACL consisted of 32 adjectives with 8 adjectives tapping each of four emotions: anxiety (e.g., fearful), depression (e.g., lost), hostility (e.g., angry), and positivity (e.g., happy). Reliabilities were .88, .93, .89, and .92 for anxiety, depression, hostility, and positivity before the interview, and .88, .92, .83, and .87 after the interview.

*Relationship satisfaction.* To measure satisfaction, the Quality of Relationship Index (QRI) was adapted from the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). The QRI consists of six Likert-type items that assess the extent to which individuals are satisfied and happy with their relationship (e.g., "My relationship with my partner makes me happy"). Internal reliability was .89.

*Videotaped interview.* After both partners had completed a battery of questionnaires, they began the interview portion of the study. The interview proceeded in two phases: two individual interviews and a couple interview. The first phase involved a 5-minute videotaped interview with each individual partner. One member of the couple was escorted into the hallway to wait while the other member was interviewed. For half of the couples, the male partner was interviewed first. The purpose of the individual interviews was to acquire information about how each partner perceived the relationship. This information was then used in preparing the questions for Phase 2, the couple interview. It also served as baseline data for participants' coded interaction behavior.

During the individual interview, each participant was asked to respond to the same series of questions; for example, "At what point in knowing your partner did you consider yourself part of a couple?" and "How long did you think the relationship would last when you first started dating?" Participants were prompted for specific answers where appropriate.

After both partners had completed the individual interview, they were reunited for Phase 2, the couple interview. The interviewer began by informing the couple, "We noticed some differences in how each of you view your relationship. We would like you to discuss these differences and attempt to come to some agreement, if possible, before your answers are recorded as final." For each question in which there was a discrepancy in the individual responses, the interviewer repeated the answers given earlier and asked the couple to discuss their answers with each other and attempt to resolve the discrepancy. The couple interview lasted 10 minutes.

Afterward, participants completed the current emotion inventory (described above) along with a series of questions about the degree to which they felt comfortable during the interview.

*Behavioral coding.* Four people who were blind to the hypotheses were paid to code the videotaped interviews on a variety of dimensions that were later factor analyzed. Individual and couple interviews were coded in sequence. Because the couple interviews contained both partners, it was decided to alternate who was coded first in the couple interview. Thus, separate ratings were conducted on the male and female partner during the couple interview. Individual interviews were coded for nervousness (e.g., foot tapping, fidgeting, shaky vocal tone) on a 7-point scale ranging from *none* to *extreme*. The couple interviews were coded on the same dimension using the same scale, but with the addition of general expressiveness (e.g., talkative, eye contact, hand gestures, communicative), positive expressiveness (e.g., smiling, open posture, strong intonation), negative expressiveness (e.g., frowning, closed posture, weak intonation), blame (e.g., blames partner), reactivity (e.g., becomes defensive or upset when confronted with discrepancy), accommodation (e.g., defers to partner, changes answers to match partner's), clarification of own answers (e.g., explains own answers in response to discrepancy), attempt to understand (e.g., asks partner why they answered in a certain way), approach behaviors (e.g., faces partner, touches partner, moves closer), and avoidance behaviors (e.g., refusal to face partner, moves away, hesitates, avoids discussion). Reliability among the four coders across all couples and interaction ratings was .78.

Factor analyses followed by promax (oblique) rotation were conducted within the male and female couple interviews. A two-factor solution emerged with the first factor measuring primarily positive behaviors (including positive expressiveness, approach behaviors, clarification, and attempts to understand partner) and reverse-scored negative expressiveness and avoidance behaviors. The second factor measured blame and reactive behaviors. Internal reliability for the positive and reactive factors was .92 and .75, respectively.

## RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 concerned rating an ideal partner as a function of how one views oneself. This ego-involved tendency was hypothesized to be stronger with controlled orientation and weaker with autonomy orientation. Because each individual belonged to a dyad, there were two levels of variables. Level 1 variables are individual-level variables and are nested within Level 2 couple variables. We were interested in controlling for the nonindependence of the data due to being part of a couple. Accordingly, a multilevel modeling approach using the PROC MIXED routine in SAS was used for all analyses examining multilevel variables (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996; Singer, 1998).

The advantages of multilevel modeling in the analysis of couple data have been described elsewhere (Gonzales & Griffin, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). We controlled for the nonindependence of romantic partners' data by incorporating variance due to couple in the equations that were derived for each hypothesis. Although some software packages (e.g., hierarchical linear modeling—HLM) (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) specify the model for each level separately, PROC MIXED employs a single equation that specifies multiple sources of variation (Singer, 1998). Coefficients were derived from a random coefficients model using restricted maximum likelihood estimation, controlling for variance due to being part of a couple (and thereby controlling for the nonindependence of dyadic data).<sup>2, 3</sup>

Because Hypothesis 1 concerned autonomy and controlled orientations as moderators of the association between self-view and view of ideal partner, two separate equations were conducted: one to examine the main effects of self-view, autonomy, and controlled orientations on view of ideal partner and another to include these terms along with the two-way products of autonomy orientation, controlled orientation, and self-view.

First, a significant effect of self-view indicated that people generally view an ideal partner as a function of how they view themselves,  $F(1, 56) = 38.78, p < .0001, pr = .64$ . Thus, how one rated oneself across a variety of interpersonal qualities was strongly related to how one rated one's ideal partner on those same qualities. However, consistent with Hypothesis 1, this general tendency was significantly moderated by both autonomy,  $F(1, 53) = 18.17, p < .0001, pr = -.51$ , and controlled orientations,  $F(1, 53) = 10.05, p < .01, pr = .40$ .

Figure 1 provides ratings of one's ideal partner as a function of one's self-view and autonomy orientation, derived from the parameter estimates from the second equation (the one that included product terms). Figure 2 provides the corresponding ratings of one's ideal partner as a function of one's self-view and controlled orien-

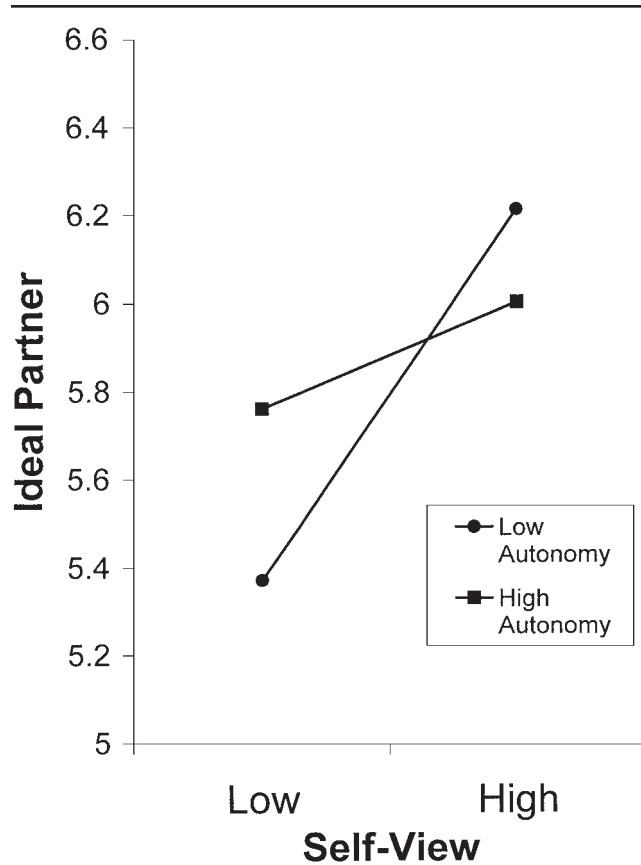


Figure 1 View of ideal partner as a function of self-view and autonomy orientation.

tation. As shown, the tendency for one to rate an ideal partner as a function of oneself was weaker with autonomy orientation and stronger with controlled orientation. Thus, an orientation toward growth was related to wanting a partner less like oneself, as hypothesized, with autonomy and controlled orientations moderating (in opposite directions) the tendency to view an ideal partner as a function of oneself.

Hypothesis 2 concerned autonomy and controlled orientations as predictors of self-reported coping strategies in response to stressful relationship events. Again, because each individual belonged to a dyad, there were both individual- and couple-level variables. Accordingly, multilevel equations were derived as before using an analogous procedure. Because no interactions were hypothesized, a single equation was derived for each coping strategy as the criterion.

Table 1 provides the *F* ratio, significance level, and partial correlation where autonomy or controlled orientations significantly predicted a particular coping strategy. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, autonomy orientation was generally associated with more attempts to cope with and experience the event actively and fully and fewer

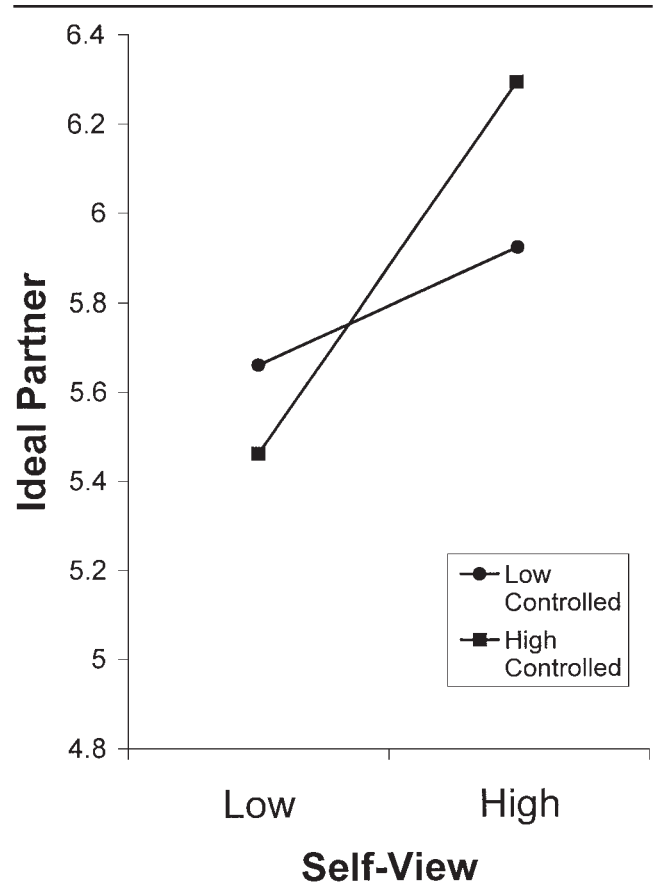


Figure 2 View of ideal partner as a function of self-view and controlled orientation.

TABLE 1: Autonomy and Controlled Orientations as Predictors of Coping Strategies in Romantic Relationships

Coping Strategy	Autonomy		Controlled	
	F	pr	F	pr
Positive reinterpretation	35.96***	.62		
Active coping	10.26**	.39		
Planning	13.51***	.43		
Emotional support	6.12**	.31		
Suppression of competing activities	2.99*	.22		
Acceptance	7.89**	.35		
Restraint	3.30*	.23		
Understanding emotion	30.13***	.58		
Repairing emotion	6.94**	.33		
Behavioral disengagement	6.40**	-.32		
Expressing emotion	10.23**	.39	3.39*	.23
Venting emotion			2.97*	.22
Denial			9.34**	.37
Religion			7.70**	.34

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

attempts to deny or avoid the event, whereas controlled orientation was independently associated with attempts to deny the event or express oneself by venting. Spe-

cifically, autonomy orientation was associated with more positive reinterpretation and growth, more active coping, more planning, more seeking of emotional support, more acceptance, more expression of emotion, more attempts to understand the emotion, more repair of emotion, and less behavioral disengagement and self-focus. Controlled orientation was associated with slightly more expression and venting of emotion, more denial, and more use of religion as a coping strategy.

Hypothesis 3 concerned emotion reported before and after discussing discrepant views with one's partner. A similar analysis strategy was employed as before, except that baseline emotion was added to the equation as a covariate. First, depression before the interview was related to depression after the interview,  $F(1, 57) = 18.55$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $pr = .50$ . Once the variance accounted for by this baseline association was removed, consistent with Hypothesis 2, autonomy orientation was significantly associated with less depression as a function of discussing different views with one's partner,  $F(1, 57) = 10.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $pr = -.40$ . Similar, but more complex, results emerged when hostility was the criterion. First, baseline hostility was associated with later hostility,  $F(1, 57) = 14.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $pr = .45$ . Once this association was removed, autonomy orientation was significantly associated with less hostility as hypothesized,  $F(1, 57) = 3.86$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $pr = -.25$ . However, an effect of sex revealed that men became less hostile than women over the course of the discussion,  $F(1, 57) = 4.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $pr = .28$ . Accordingly, we derived a second equation that included the two-way products of sex, autonomy, and controlled orientations to test for potential moderation by sex. Indeed, the analysis revealed a significant interaction between autonomy and sex, such that autonomy was linked to less hostility, particularly for men,  $F(1, 54) = 5.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $pr = .31$ . Analysis of simple effects indicated that autonomy significantly predicted less hostility among men,  $F(1, 57) = 5.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $pr = .29$ , but not among women,  $F < 1$ . Neither autonomy nor controlled orientations significantly predicted changes in anxiety or positivity.

Hypothesis 4 concerned behaviors while discussing discrepant views of the relationship with one's partner. A similar analysis procedure was employed with positive and negative behaviors as criteria in separate analyses. Baseline nervousness was included to control for different levels of anxiety upon being videotaped. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, autonomy orientation was significantly associated with more positive interaction behaviors (e.g., approach, clarification, and attempts to understand the partner) while discussing discrepant views with one's partner,  $F(1, 55) = 4.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $pr = .26$ . In addition, controlled orientation was independently associated with exhibiting fewer positive interaction behaviors,

$F(1, 55) = 9.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $pr = -.38$ . No significant effects emerged for negative interaction behaviors.

## DISCUSSION

Growth motivation, as defined here, refers to an orientation toward improvement, choicefulness, and authenticity with regard to oneself and others. Although research has suggested that self-enhancing perceptions of oneself and others are linked to a wide variety of benefits and positive outcomes (e.g., Murray et al., 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988), the present findings suggest that this may not be the case for everyone. In particular, as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b) would predict, an orientation toward growth and improvement was associated with (a) less tendency to view an ideal partner as a function of one's view of self, (b) more active and integrative coping strategies, (c) less denial and avoidance strategies, and (d) decreases in negative emotion, along with more positive interaction behaviors when discussing contrary relationship perceptions with one's partner. These findings are consistent with previous research regarding self-determination and interpersonal outcomes (Blais et al., 1990; Hodgins, Koestner, et al., 1996; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Knee & Zuckerman, 1996, 1998).

We will turn first to the ego-centered tendency to expect potential partners to be like oneself. Most people tend to see some of themselves in their ideal romantic partner, and some researchers have referred to this tendency as the projection of self onto one's ideals (Murray et al., 1996). Although such a potentially ego-driven tendency may be fairly typical, it tends to be stronger when one is ego-involved. Thus, we predicted and found that people tended to view their ideal partner as a function of their self-view, especially when ego-involved or higher on controlled orientation. Specifically, when ego-involved, what one wants in an ideal partner is based largely on how one views oneself, whether positively or negatively.

For similar reasons, we predicted and found that this projection of self onto one's ideals was particularly weak when one was motivated toward growth or higher in autonomy orientation.

Growth motivation allows one to support autonomy and growth in others. Thus, these individuals tend to view differences as challenges and affordances for improvement, or even as interesting in and of themselves. An orientation toward growth, then, also may reflect an openness to differences and a relative embracing of qualities that would otherwise be threatening and unappealing.

When we examined coping strategies, an orientation toward growth was linked with active attempts to cope with and understand disagreements with one's partner, including more active coping, planning, and suppres-



sion of competing activities and more expression, repair, and understanding of emotion. Growth motivation also was associated with less behavioral disengagement, more seeking of emotional support, more acceptance of the event, and more positive reinterpretation. This last strategy may seem inconsistent with the more veridical, less ego-involved perception we have ascribed to growth motivation. However, seeing the best in the situation may be different than distorting the situation to defend one's perceptions, and clearly, one would expect an orientation toward improvement and growth to be associated with a positive, although not unrealistically optimistic, perspective.

The results for changes in emotion also were consistent with the growth motivation perspective of self-determination theory. As the theory would predict, an orientation toward growth was associated with less depression and hostility as a function of learning that one's partner views the relationship differently. It is important to note that the criterion was residual change in emotion, such that an autonomy orientation was associated with less negative emotion controlling for one's own baseline level of emotion. In this way, whereas discrepant views and potential conflict are generally perceived as threatening and provoking, they may actually seem comforting and rewarding to those higher in autonomy orientation. Indeed, growth motivation is thought to transform threats and adverse predicaments into affordances for challenge and improvement.

It also should be noted that whereas autonomy was associated with less hostility as a function of such discussion, this was particularly the case for men. It was possible that men's preinteraction hostility scores were more extreme at pretest and that they had more room to decrease. However, men's and women's preinteraction hostility scores were not significantly different ( $F < 1$ ). Instead, we believe that this gender difference may have emerged because relationships are less central to men's identity (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999); therefore, they generally feel less ego-involved in the discussion and consequently less hostile. Perhaps this is particularly the case with autonomy because autonomous men are that much more open and flexible when it comes to interpreting feedback from their partner.

Consistent with how they reportedly felt during a potentially threatening interaction, growth-motivated individuals also displayed more positive interaction behaviors while interacting with their partner. Specifically, autonomy orientation was associated with more approach behaviors, clarification attempts, and attempts to understand the partner, as coded by independent observers. Conversely, controlled orientation was independently associated with displaying fewer positive interaction behaviors. Thus, it seems that growth motivation

may not only help one actively confront stressful relationship events but may also help one react to relationship challenges positively, supporting one's partner and attempting to understand the situation fully. Growth motivation appears to be closely related to a general orientation toward maintaining and improving the relationship, perhaps even to the point of responding positively in situations that normally provoke negative reactions (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). It is important to note that we did not find evidence that growth motivation or ego-involvement predicted negative interaction behaviors. This may be because the interview context focused on relatively minor discrepant views rather than serious problems in the relationship and thus did not encourage display of negative behavior. The discrepancies tended to be relatively minor. The fact that autonomy and controlled orientations predicted coping, emotion, and actual behavior as a function of such a relatively innocuous interview suggests that even minor discrepancies can be perceived as problematic to those who are less self-determined.

As with all cross-sectional research, there may be several alternative explanations for the present findings. First, it is possible that growth-oriented individuals were more satisfied in their relationships and thus engaged in more positive behaviors because of this. However, when we repeated the analysis of positive behaviors, controlling for satisfaction, effects of autonomy and control did not change substantially (from  $pr = .26$  to  $pr = .24$  for autonomy orientation; from  $pr = .38$  to  $pr = .38$  for controlled orientation). A second possibility was that being in a good mood is what drove scoring higher in self-determination and led to more relationship-maintaining coping strategies and supportive behaviors. Indeed, positive mood was significantly correlated with autonomy ( $r = .25, p < .05$ ), although not with controlled orientation ( $r = .02$ ). There are, however, several facts that argue against this alternative. First, when analyses were repeated controlling for baseline positive mood, the associations between autonomy and controlled orientations and each of the various coping strategies remained significant (except behavioral disengagement), and some results were actually slightly stronger. When analyses of positive interaction behaviors were repeated in a similar fashion, controlled orientation remained strongly associated with fewer positive interaction behaviors, whereas autonomy was no longer significant. Finally, being in a good mood cannot account for the results on changes in emotion because baseline mood was included in the equation and thus residualized to begin with. However, it does appear that being in a good mood may have facilitated those higher in autonomy to engage in more positive interaction behaviors.

This research is not without limitations. First, growth motivation was measured globally as a general trait (autonomy orientation) rather than as a relationship-specific quality. The most recent integrative approaches to self-determined motivation argue in favor of assessing motivation at multiple levels, with the more specific levels being more strongly related to context-specific behavior (Blais et al., 1990; Vallerand, 1997). Accordingly, it would have been beneficial to assess growth motivation specifically with regard to romantic relationships. One would think that the magnitude and robustness of the effects would be even stronger with domain-specific constructs. A second limitation is that the semistructured interview was relatively benign and was not strong enough to ignite intense conflict. The interview was designed to emphasize differences in how partners viewed the relationship, but the structured format and the emphasis on perceptions rather than genuine relationship problems may have limited what could be concluded about truly intense conflict-provoking events.

In addition to providing additional support for the importance of self-determination in romantic relationships, the present research also is consistent with recent perspectives emphasizing the importance of studying positive factors that improve health and well-being rather than remaining focused on negative factors that reduce health and well-being (M.E.P. Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Growth motivation in general, and self-determination theory in particular, represents another approach to understanding how people can benefit themselves and their loved ones by approaching threats as challenges, adversity as opportunity, and conflict as the potential for new appreciation and understanding.

#### NOTES

1. Additional data from these couples were reported in Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, and Patrick (2001, Study 2). That study examined implicit theories of relationships as moderators of the relation between wanting more from one's partner and being less satisfied.

2. Although some software packages (e.g., HLM) yield beta coefficients, PROC MIXED yields unstandardized parameter estimates, along with  $t$ s or  $F$ s. Thus,  $F$ s are reported here.

3. Sex was included in the model as a covariate because women had more positive views of the ideal partner than did men,  $F(1, 56) = 13.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $pr = .44$ . The interactions of Autonomy Orientation  $\times$  Self-View and Controlled Orientation  $\times$  Self-View were significant regardless of whether sex was included in the equation. To remain consistent throughout, sex was included in a similar manner in all other analyses. Results remained significant regardless of whether it was included.

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