



Balancing the need to be “me” with the need to be “we”: Applying Optimal Distinctiveness Theory to the understanding of multiple motives within romantic relationships



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Individuals in romantic relationships strive to balance their needs to identify as part of a dyad versus a unique individual.
- They balance these needs in ways consistent with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory.
- Individuals engage in greater relational identification when made to feel sufficiently distinct from their partner.
- Individuals engage in greater individual identification when made to feel sufficiently affiliated with their partner.
- Fluctuating ODT needs do not impact perceptions of relationship quality.

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ABSTRACT

Two distinct tensions can arise between individuals' relational-fulfillment and personal-fulfillment needs in close relationships. The first tension is a conflict of potential behaviors and arises between serving the relationship by meeting one's partner's needs versus serving the self by meeting one's/own needs (e.g., your versus my needs). The second tension is a conflict of potential *identities* and arises between needs to identify as embedded within the relationship versus a unique individual (e.g., relational versus individual me). Although much work has explored how individuals navigate the former, little research has examined the latter. The present research applied Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991), a theory of dynamic identity processes in groups, to examine how individuals balance individual versus relational identities. We predicted that, just as individuals negotiate their social identities within groups to satisfy both affiliation and distinctiveness needs, individuals in romantic relationships strive to balance similar needs at the dyadic level. We predicted that when individuals' needs for affiliation were satisfied, they would emphasize their individual identity over their relational identity. We also predicted that fluctuation in these perceptions reflects satisfaction of individual identity needs within the relationship and would not influence relationship quality. Four studies supported these hypotheses.

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Introduction

“But let there be spaces in your togetherness and let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love: let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.”

[—Khalil Gibran]

The motivation to be involved in close, caring relationships is one of the most fundamental of all human strivings (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). Of all close adult relationships, romantic relationships may have the strongest influence on individuals' lives and well-being (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Consequentially, individuals are motivated to affiliate, or be interdependent, with their romantic partners (e.g., Slotter & Gardner, 2009). However, in conjunction with this general desire to affiliate with romantic partners, individuals also want to feel that they are autonomous, distinctive beings (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000; Eidelson, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2001). In the present research, we sought to investigate how individuals balance these two competing needs—how to be part of a “we” without sacrificing the “me.” To date, little research has examined these competing motivations; filling this gap in the literature was the central aim of the present research. Specifically, we applied the framework of Optimal

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Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991, 1993, 2003; Brewer & Roccas, 2001; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010) to explain individuals' management of their competing motivations for affiliation versus distinctiveness within romantic relationships. The present research sought to empirically test these ideas by examining when individuals desired greater closeness to and identification with their romantic partners and when they desired to “let the winds of the heavens dance between [them].”

Varied motivations in relationships

In their everyday lives, individuals are motivated to pursue a multitude of goals in the interest of fulfilling a wide variety of needs. Diverse taxonomies of human motivation have documented that, of the many goals that drive human behavior across a wide variety of individual circumstances and relationships, relational and personal-fulfillment needs emerge most frequently as primary concerns (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000; Maslow, 1968; Ryff, 1989). Indeed, the desire for close personal connections to others drives a wide variety of human behaviors and cognitions (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Among adults, romantic relationships provide the most influential and central arena within which these desires are expressed and maintained (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Individuals in romantic relationships strive to feel close to their romantic partners and to identify as part of an interdependent relationship by altering their cognitions and behaviors in a variety of ways, such as identifying as being highly similar to their partner (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Slotter & Gardner, 2009), identifying themselves as part of a larger dyadic whole by using a greater number of first person plural pronouns (we, us, our; e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998), and simply wanting to spend time interacting with their partner (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). Importantly, meeting needs for closeness and connection in relationships enhances the well-being both of the relationships (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Le & Agnew, 2001; Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007) and of the individuals themselves (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Even within relationships, however, individuals also strive to fulfill a variety of personal needs, including the desire to identify as distinct and agentic beings with positive, unique characteristics that distinguish them from others (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Successfully meeting personal needs for autonomy and distinctiveness also predicts enhanced well-being for individuals (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000; Myers & Diener, 1995; Reis et al., 2000).

Two distinct tensions can arise between individuals' relational-fulfillment and personal-fulfillment needs. The first tension that individuals can experience arises between choosing to behave in ways that meet their partner's needs, or engaging in relationship enhancing endeavors, and choosing to behave in ways that meet their own individual needs, even when it requires pursuing endeavors that do not benefit their relationship (i.e., your needs versus my needs). Copious research has established that, due to limited time and resources, the goal to meet one's relationship needs often conflicts with the goal to meet one's own individual needs (e.g., Kelley et al., 2003). Kumashiro, Rusbult, and Finkel (2008) demonstrated that, in light of this tension, individuals strive to establish an equilibrium that balances the meeting of their own needs with the meeting of their partner's or relationship's needs. Research has persuasively established that individuals' personal well-being and relationship well-being benefit to the extent that they can effectively establish and maintain this sense of equilibrium (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Kumashiro et al., 2008; Le & Agnew, 2001).

The second tension that individuals may experience, which is the focus of the present research, arises between individuals' desire to be embedded in, and identify as part of, a romantic dyad and the simultaneous desire to maintain a sense of individual identity and autonomy (i.e., the relational me versus the individual me). This second tension is not a conflict of limited time and resources available for need fulfillment (like those studied by Kumashiro et al., 2008), but rather one of self-definition and identification. In brief, to settle this conflict individuals must establish an equilibrium that balances their internal identification as part of a dyad with their internal identification as an autonomous being. To date, little work has examined this intra-individual tension—how people reconcile their motivations for relational closeness and identification with their motivations for distinctiveness.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT)

One existing theory that can potentially be applied to explain how individuals might balance these competing motives is Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991, 1993, 2003). Although ODT focuses primarily on how individual motives impact the navigation of group memberships, it also proposes a model of competing motives that can be fruitfully applied to explaining the waxing and waning of relational versus individual identification within romantic dyads. In essence, ODT proposes that individuals must reconcile two competing motivations: the motivation to feel affiliated with their group and similar to other group members and the motivation to feel independent and distinct from others within their group.

In many ways these two motivations oppose each other and produce a tension that individuals must balance in order to achieve *optimal* levels of assimilation and distinctiveness within and across their group memberships. They achieve these optimal levels by monitoring how assimilated they feel within a group and how distinct they feel within a group, and adjusting collective identity accordingly (e.g., Brewer & Roccas, 2001; Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002; Pickett, Silver, & Brewer, 2002). When one need is sufficiently met, individuals are motivated to meet the other need. Thus, if individuals feel highly included and assimilated in a given group, they will seek to distance themselves from other group members and to emphasize their unique, distinct characteristics. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that threats to individuals' distinctiveness within a group motivate them to emphasize their distinctiveness, both within the threatening group and across different groups. Across groups, individuals increase identification with groups other than the threatening group, even stigmatized new groups, if doing so allows them to feel unique (Brewer, Manzi, & Shaw, 1993; Brewer & Pickett, 1999; Pickett, Bonner, et al., 2002; Pickett, Silver, et al., 2002). When individuals feel too assimilated within a group, they reduce their identification with the threatening group and emphasize the aspects of their identity that make them feel dissimilar to other group members. In contrast, when individuals feel highly unique and distinct within their group, they seek to increase the relevance of the group to their identity and emphasize aspects of themselves that make them similar to other members of the group, even self-stereotyping with unflattering group attributes (Brewer & Pickett, 1999; Brewer & Weber, 1994; Pickett, Bonner, et al., 2002). Importantly, ODT claims that shifts in group-relevant identification in order to achieve this balance are normal processes, likely adaptive for both the individuals and the groups to which they belong. That is, as individuals strive for distinctiveness, they neither value their groups less nor view them less positively. Rather, they are simply motivated to emphasize their unique *identity* distinct from other group members, without necessarily devaluing the group itself. Indeed, the effects associated with ODT only emerge with respect to highly valued group memberships (e.g., Brewer & Roccas, 2001).

Existing research—both theoretical work on ODT specifically and empirical work on groups and need fulfillment in general—has proposed that these tensions should also emerge in other relationships

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