

Relational discrepancy theory: The implications of self-discrepancy theory for dyadic relationships and for the emergence of social structure.

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RUNNING HEAD: Relational discrepancy theory

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## Abstract

Relationship formation and maintenance is guided by more than similarity between partners' actual selves. Expanding the domain of self-discrepancy theory (SDT; Higgins, 1987), we propose that a type of discrepancy previously not considered – discrepancies between self-aspects of relational partners – is central to relationship cognition, including perceptions of intimacy and trust, and to the emergence of roles within relationships. Our argument relates both to unconstrained environments, where individuals freely choose partners, and constrained environments (e.g., workplaces) with relationships imposed. We argue that SDT's prediction of emotional consequences from discrepancies permits a motivational account of why individuals might form and maintain relationships in terms of hierarchies and roles.

Humans are social beings. The majority of us need to be with and interact with others. The study of factors that influence the formation, maintenance, and termination of interpersonal relationships, as well as those that predict the level of affect experienced in relationships are, thus, enduring areas of interest. Research has highlighted the importance of the comparisons that individuals make between their own qualities and those of their relational partners. For example, similarity in demographic characteristics (Newcombe, 1961), personality (Tharp, 1963), and attitudes (Clore & Byrne, 1974) influence interpersonal attraction, while personality similarity is important for marital satisfaction (e.g., Antill, 1983; Richard, Wakefield, & Lewack, 1990) and in friendships (e.g., Duck & Craig, 1978). Likewise, although individuals generally prefer partners who have a secure attachment style (Chappell & Davis, 1998), there is evidence that similarity in attachment style promotes attraction (Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996).

While it is clear that the comparison of aspects of the two “selves” is a fundamental process in relationships, we argue that consideration has not been given to either the full range of comparisons made across relational partners or the consequences of particular patterns of comparison outcomes. We propose that individuals compare all aspects of their selves with those of their relational partners to ascertain whether or not they are similar or different, and that the specific pattern of these similarities and differences has important implications for the interaction between individuals. We argue that the self-aspects compared include those that are the basis of evaluation of the actual self (Higgins, 1987). In this paper, we explore the theoretical consequences of adopting this postulate. Based on Higgins’ (1987, 1989a, 1989b) self-discrepancy theory (SDT), we present an account of relationship

cognition that we term relational discrepancy theory. We argue that particular patterns of perceived discrepancies between aspects of the partners' selves result in different perceptions of relationships, with emotional consequences. These emotional consequences motivate individuals to behave in particular ways within the relationship, resulting in different types of relationships, depending on the perceived distribution of discrepancies across the dyad.

The core of our argument is relatively straightforward. A social relationship exists not just in terms of its own internal dynamic; it is a vehicle through which relational partners behave towards physical, psychological, and social "objects" external to themselves. We use our relationships to act in the "real world"; it is through relationships that we cooperate and coordinate in certain ways towards certain ends. It is difficult to see how a dyadic relationship could be sustained if, for that dyad, cooperation and coordination towards external objects were impossible. Heider (1946) identified such important intuitions in his balance theory more than 50 years ago.

So, we argue, a relationship is not based merely on similarities of personal qualities that the partners possess. Such similarities, rather, may reflect a deeper concordance between the partners based on shared aspirations and obligations. For an individual, an aspiration identifies a possession, feature, or property that the individual desires. In contrast, an obligation guides how one should act towards such external objects. For instance, I might desire to be rich, but not through theft. More psychologically, I might desire to be confident, but not through diminishing others. So it is with relationships: shared aspirations pick out (from a sea of possibilities) certain external objects that may be acted on cooperatively, and shared obligations inform

appropriate methods of cooperative action. Hence shared aspirations and obligations enable cooperation and so are at the basis of sustained relationships.

Those readers familiar with self-discrepancy theory will now realize why we see it as valuable in a theory of relationships, because (as described below) it explicitly deals with aspirations and obligations (*self-guides*). As well, SDT predicts that negative emotional consequences arise when an individual's *actual self* is discrepant with strongly held aspirations and obligations, and that such negative emotions motivate individuals to change. Similarly, we argue that negative interpersonal emotions arise when there are discrepancies (*relational discrepancies*) among actual selves, aspirations, and obligations within a dyad. Such negative emotions may motivate relational partners to reinterpret the relationship, perhaps in terms of a hierarchy or in terms of an "exchange" whereby the relational partners focus not on individual deficiencies but combined strengths.

In summary, then, we argue below that, in assessing their relationships, relational partners do not just compare their actual selves but, more importantly, their self-guides. Discrepancies from these comparisons may result in negative interpersonal emotions (with the strength of the emotional consequences related to the magnitude of the discrepancy<sup>1</sup>), except in circumstances where the relationship is reinterpreted to accommodate and reflect the discrepancy. We postulate two such reinterpetive mechanisms (there may well be others): first, relational partners may perceive the relationship in terms of hierarchy or, secondly, relational partners may focus on combined strengths rather than individual deficiencies. Such mechanisms allow for the emergence of different types of relationships, of status differentials, and of aspects of social structure.

This paper is principally theoretical, although we report results from a pilot study supporting our general claims. Our primary goal at this point, however, is to develop a way of theorizing that will elaborate SDT in directions that are explicitly relational. On the basis of our core argument, we advance various propositions below dealing with specific patterns of relational discrepancies. These propositions illustrate the type of theorizing that we believe our approach enables, although much work, of course, still needs to be done in their empirical examination. In developing these propositions, however, we do not just rely on SDT but also incorporate aspects of social network, sociological, and organizational research into a self-regulatory approach. A particular aim is to provide a theory that can be utilized, not just in terms of personal relationships, but also in organizations and workplaces. Below we sketch aspects of how such an endeavor might proceed.

The structure of the paper is as follows. We begin by describing SDT and other self-regulatory approaches in some detail. We then turn to the relationship literature to show that our consideration of discrepancies in relationships follows a long tradition of relationship research. We then consider characteristics of relationships that may moderate the impact of these discrepancies. With this groundwork in place, we present a more detailed elaboration of relational discrepancy theory, discussing relationship formation, the maintenance of relationships and relationship types in the presence of relational discrepancies, and relationships in constrained social contexts, such as workplaces. We then present summary results from our pilot study, and conclude by discussing the next steps to a fuller elaboration of the theory.

### **The self and self-regulation**

Early theory and research assumed the self to be an integrated cognitive structure (Higgins, Van Hook, & Dorfmann, 1987) with the same properties and functions as other such structures. However, this view of an integrated single self-concept has been largely rejected (Baumeister, 1999). Self-knowledge is now considered to consist of a large amount of information, a small part of which is available in consciousness at any point in time: the “working self” (Markus & Kunda, 1986). While the content of the working self may be coherent and integrated, the total set of self-knowledge (i.e., self-schemata) may contain contradictions and inconsistencies. As a result, at different points in time individuals may view themselves in quite different ways.

The number of self-schemata an individual has and the extent to which their content is similar reflects the degree of complexity of the self (Linville, 1987). Greater self-complexity indicates the presence of more independent self-schemata in an individual’s self-system. These self-schemata reflect, among other things, the different contexts and roles important to an individual.

Within each context or role, the self-schema represents individuals’ beliefs about what they are actually like in different situations or roles. In addition to these “actual selves”, the ability to engage in self-regulation points to the capacity to self-monitor by comparing the (relevant) actual self with standards of proper, desired behavior (Baumeister, 1999) and with goals for the self (Boldero & Francis, in press). Because these standards and goals together form the basis of self-regulation, they must be represented somewhere in the self-system. Thus, the self-system can be

thought of as containing a number of actual selves along with relevant referent values.

Self-regulatory models, such as Higgins' (1987, 1989a, 1989b) self-discrepancy theory and Carver and Sheier's (1982, 1998) control theory, describe how individuals regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to maintain or change self through evaluation with a particular reference value. Depending on the outcome of this evaluation and its self-regulatory significance to the individual, certain emotional, motivational, and behavioral consequences ensue.

Self-discrepancy theory (SDT) specifies that self-regulation occurs with respect to at least two distinct types of reference value, the ideal and ought self-guides. The ideal self-guide is the representation of the attributes that someone, either the individual or a significant other, would like the individual to possess.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it represents aspirations and wishes. In contrast, the ought self-guide is the representation of the attributes that someone, either the individual or a significant other, believes the individual should or ought to possess. Thus, it represents duties and obligations. The self-guides can function as both standards and goals (Boldero & Francis, 2002; Newman, Higgins, & Vookles, 1992).

The ideal and ought self-guides are distinct because they represent qualitatively different psychological situations. The ideal self-guide represents the presence of positive outcomes while the ought self-guide represents the absence of negative outcomes. These self-guides develop out of interactions with caregivers in childhood (Higgins, 1989b). Specifically, when caregivers focus on needs associated with nurturance, children come to focus on wishes and aspirations (i.e., the contents of the ideal self-guide) and develop a predominant promotion self-regulatory focus.

Likewise, when caregivers focus on needs associated with safety, children come to focus on duties and obligations (i.e., the contents of the ought self-guide) and develop a predominant prevention self-regulatory focus. Thus, according to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), the more recent variant of self-discrepancy theory, a specific type of socialization history results in an individual developing a predominant promotion or prevention self-regulatory focus. In addition, these foci can be primed by situations such that if a situation leads the individual to focus, for example, on positive outcomes, they will respond in a manner consistent with a promotion focus.

The consequences of self-regulating with regard to a promotion or prevention focus include a sensitivity to the presence or absence of particular types of outcomes, a difference in the strategic means used to achieve desired (and to avoid undesired) outcomes, insuring (and ensuring against) particular types of outcomes, and, consistent with the original predictions of SDT, specific emotions (Higgins, 1997). (It is because we are concerned with the emotional consequences of discrepancies that we focus on self-discrepancy theory rather than regulatory focus theory.) So there may be different emotional and behavioral consequences of comparisons of the actual self with the self-guides. Before these distinct outcomes are described, we first consider the nature of a self-discrepancy.

Self-discrepancies reflect differences among self-aspects (i.e., the actual self and the self-guides). Self-aspects are sets of certain qualities that are possessed to (potentially) different extents. Thus, they contain attributes or traits that can be represented as sets of pairs (quality, quantity) rather than simply sets of qualities. For example, an individual may consider that “confidence” is a representative trait of

his/her actual self (i.e., a quality). In addition, the individual considers that s/he possesses a “moderate” amount of “confidence” (i.e., the quantity).

When an actual self and a self-guide are compared, it is reasonable to assume that these self-aspects are, for the most part, comparable (i.e., *commensurable*), so that the intersection of the sets of qualities is large. Thus, comparisons will reveal predominantly either matches (i.e., the two aspects contain the same quantities of the same quality) or mismatches (i.e., the two aspects contain the different quantities of the same quality, *a synonymous mismatch*, or opposite qualities, *an antonymous mismatch*). It is also possible that there will be some qualities in one self-aspect that are not part of the other (i.e., the qualities that are not in the intersection of self-aspects). These *nonmatches* are assumed to have limited self-regulatory significance and are disregarded when calculating discrepancies (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985).<sup>3</sup>

As with all forms of cognitive inconsistency, self-discrepancies produce dissonance that is unpleasant and motivates change (Festinger, 1957). Because the ideal and ought self-guides represent qualitatively different psychological situations, actual-ideal (AI) and actual-ought (AO) self-discrepancies are associated with different emotions. Because AI self-discrepancies represent the absence of positive outcomes, they are uniquely related to dejection-related emotions (e.g., depression) (Higgins, 1987). In contrast, AO self-discrepancies represent the presence of negative outcomes and are uniquely related to agitation-related emotions (e.g., anxiety). These emotional consequences of self-discrepancies are automatic and, thus, may occur outside individuals' conscious awareness (Higgins, 1987).

In summary, SDT provides a model of self-regulation that proposes that individuals compare themselves with a number of different self-guides, including those provided by other parties (i.e., self-guides from the “other” perspective). When discrepancies between these self-state representations occur, specific emotional, motivational, and behavioral consequences ensue. However, self-discrepancies are not related to emotions and behavior in every situation but only when they have self-regulatory significance (Higgins, 1989b). Factors contributing to self-regulatory significance include discrepancy availability, accessibility and importance to the individual and its relevance in a current context (Boldero & Francis, 2000; Higgins, 1999).

The propositions of SDT with regard to the emotional consequences of discrepancies from one’s own perspective have been supported in numerous studies (Higgins, 1999; see Boldero & Francis, 1999, for a review). In addition, the work of Francis (2000; Francis & Jackson, in press) and Moretti and associates (e.g., Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, 1999b; Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001; Moretti & Wiebe, 1999) provides evidence for the impact of discrepancies from the “other” perspective. However, discrepancies based on the “other” perspective of SDT are not what we are considering here. “Other” perspectives in SDT reflect aspirations and obligations that individuals perceive “others” have **for** them; a relational discrepancy on the other hand arises when an individual compares his/her self-aspects with those of the “other”.

### **Discrepancies in relationships**

We are not alone in advancing the argument that consideration of “discrepancies” in relationships is important. For example, one of the most influential social psychological models of relationships, Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) interdependence theory, makes predictions about the emotions experienced in relationships and relationship stability by assuming that an individual compares current and anticipated outcomes from a relationship against two standards. The comparison level (CL) is used to evaluate how satisfactory the relationship is, whereas the comparison level for alternatives ( $CL_{alt}$ ) is used to decide whether to remain in or to leave the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Relationship outcomes reflect the current or anticipated level of reward available relative to current or anticipated level of cost. When these outcomes exceed the CL, the individual is relatively satisfied with the relationship whereas when outcomes fall below the CL, the relationship is relatively unsatisfactory. Similarly, when the outcome level is above the  $CL_{alt}$  the relationship is stable whereas when outcomes fall below this standard, the relationship is unstable. Thus, if the level of outcome is below the CL but above  $CL_{alt}$ , the individual will stay in the relationship even though s/he is dissatisfied with it. Rusbult’s (1980) extension of this theory, the investment model, proposes that not only are discrepancies with these comparison levels important but also the individual’s commitment to the relationship and investment made. The interdependence and investment models, thus, focus on discrepancies between the current level of outcomes and standards for those outcomes.

While these models enjoy considerable support, particularly with regard to the role that reward level plays in satisfaction and stability (Clark & Grote, 1998), some recent research has focussed on other forms of discrepancy, between one's ideal partner and how the current partner is perceived to actually be. For example, Ruvolo and Veroff (1997) and Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) demonstrated an association between emotional outcomes and the magnitude of this discrepancy. Further studies have considered moderators of this association (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Hasselbrauck & Aron, 2001; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001).

Fletcher and Simpson (2001) formalized the role of discrepancies with ideals in their ideal standards model. According to this model, and consistent with Baldwin's (1992) propositions concerning relational schema, ideal standards operate as three chronically accessible standards for the self, the ideal partner, and the ideal relationship. Evaluations of the relationship will be related to the magnitude of any discrepancies between the ideal standards and the current partner or relationship. In addition, the individual will be motivated either to enhance the relationship by reducing these discrepancies or by changing their significance.

In summary, Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory, Rusbult's (1980) investment model, and Fletcher and Simpson's (2001) ideal standards model all consider discrepancies between an individual's perception of some aspect of their relationship (i.e., level of outcome or current partner/relationship) and a personal standard (i.e., CL, CL<sub>alt</sub>, ideal relationship, ideal partner) on emotions experienced and/or relationship stability.

A different type of discrepancy was examined by Drigatos, Rusbult, Wieselquist, and Whitton (1999) in their consideration of the “Michelangelo phenomenon”. This phenomenon refers to the process that occurs when an individual perceives that their partner’s view of their actual self is congruent with their ideal self (in the language of SDT, an Actual (other) : I (own) congruency). This *perceptual affirmation* by the partner leads to *behavioral affirmation* which, in turn, leads to the person modifying the actual self to make it more congruent with the ideal self-guide, thereby reducing any AI (own) discrepancy. Drigatos et al. found that increasing congruence between the actual self and the ideal self (i.e., reducing the magnitude of the AI discrepancy) was related to couple well-being, a finding that is, thus, generally consistent with SDT.

### **Relationship Characteristics**

Not only are discrepancies important to relationship functioning, but we propose that their impact may be moderated by a number of relationship characteristics. This moderating impact is equivalent to SDT’s specification that the self-regulatory significance of self-discrepancies moderates their impact (Higgins, 1989b). We suggest that these moderators may reflect the particular “type” of relationship between the relational partners. Thus, by allowing an understanding of the type of relationship that emerges between relational partners, our theory also allows understanding of the factors that determine the significance of the relationship to the individual.

Factors that are related to relationship significance include the degree of intimacy and closeness of the relationship, and the degree of interdependence of the

participants. Intimate relationships are those in which the participants engage in frequent and reciprocal self-disclosure and in which individuals believe that their partners understand and care for them (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Close relationships are those in which the cognitive representations of self and other overlap (Aron & Aron, 1986; 1996). Interdependence refers to the extent to which the rewards of the individuals are dependent on each other (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Together these factors determine the importance of relationship and its relevance to the individual in a current context (Davis & Rusbult, 2001).

Another factor is the nature of the relationship between the participants. Clark and Mills (1979, 1993) distinguished between communal and exchange relationships. Likewise, more recently Fiske (1992) proposed that all relationships may be classified according to one of four qualitatively different types: authority ranking, market pricing, equality matching, and communal sharing, that represent elemental relationship schemata. Depending on the type of relationship, different rules describe the nature of the relationship between the participants. For example, when individuals are participating in an authority ranking relationship, they pay attention to their respective positions on the appropriate dimension. In contrast, when in an equality matching relationships, participants pay attention to their own and the other's outcomes from the relationship. Thus, discrepancies could be expected in authority ranking relationships but perhaps not when the relationship is based on equality matching. Likewise, because communal sharing relationships are those in which all members are treated as equal, whereas in market pricing relationships individuals keep track of relativities between individuals, discrepancies may be more tolerated in the latter but not the former. Consistent with these propositions, Francis and Jackson

(in press) found that discrepancies with “other” self-guides had a greater impact on emotions in authority ranking and communal sharing relationships (indicating that they produced some form of cognitive dissonance) than those in market pricing or equality matching relationships.

We do not wish to imply that these are the only factors that determine relationship significance. Other individual factors are, of course, important. For example implicit theories of relationships (Knee et al., 2001), degree of flexibility in the ideal (Campbell et al., 2001), and centrality of a particular relationship feature (Hasselbrauck & Aron, 2001) also contribute to relationship significance, as might gender (Moretti & Higgins, 1999a).

Thus, in summary, we acknowledge that a number of factors determine the significance of a relationship. Moreover, we argue, below, that relationships may come to have these particular characteristics because of the particular pattern of relational discrepancies present.

### **Relational discrepancy theory**

We now consider our extension of SDT to *relational discrepancies*, those that may occur in a dyadic relation with another individual - an “other”. These discrepancies are those, hitherto not considered in the context of SDT, that involve comparison of the individual’s self and self-guides with his/her perceptions of the current other’s actual self and self-guides. We argue that particular patterns of relational discrepancies have specific consequences for the relationship.

Relational discrepancies

SDT specifies that self-discrepancies reflect specific differences in self-aspects. Only the qualities that are represented in the intersection of self-aspects contribute to these discrepancies. Given that there is no compelling reason to assume that a comparison made of self-aspects **across** individuals would be any different, we assume that only qualities that are represented in the intersection of the self-aspects contribute to relational discrepancies.

We use the term *commensurability* to indicate the intersection of sets of qualities (not the quantities – the extent of each quality) between individuals' self-aspects. For example, if two individuals would ideally like to be knowledgeable and confident, commensurability is higher than when two individuals only share the ideal of confidence. As with self-discrepancies, possession of opposite poles of a bipolar attribute contributes to the commensurability of self-aspects. For example, if one individual believes they are poor and the other that they are rich, these actual selves are still commensurable since they both include attributes referring to wealth.<sup>4</sup> However, these two individuals who have adopted different poles of a bipolar attribute have an ideal or ought attribute that is diametrically opposed. We use the term *consistent commensurability* to refer to commensurability between two individuals with self-guides that are not opposed. Our approach below concentrates on consistent commensurability. We comment briefly on *inconsistent commensurability* in our conclusions.

Because discrepancies are determined not solely by the qualities but also by the quantities, there can be discrepancy even in the presence of high consistent commensurability. For example, of the two individuals referred to above, one might

ideally like to be both extremely confident and knowledgeable whereas the other might ideally like to be only moderately confident and knowledgeable. In this case, while highly commensurable, their ideal self-guides are discrepant. In another example, if one person wants to be a genius and the other merely wants to be smart, the two sets of ideal attributes share qualities relating to intelligence that are in the same direction and, hence, are consistently commensurate. But the ideal self-guides are discrepant, as the extent of one ideal quality exceeds the other. The difference between commensurability and discrepancy may also be explained by noting that it is the presence of commensurability that allows the possibility of social comparison. If I share no qualities, aspirations, or obligations with another person (i.e., there is no commensurability at all), I have no reason to select that person as someone with whom I might compare myself. But in a situation when there is commensurability, social comparison is, in effect, an examination of the discrepancies between us.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, we contend that relational discrepancies occur when the self-aspects of relational partners are commensurable but the extents of the shared attributes differ. We now consider the impact of relational discrepancies in relationship formation.

#### Relationship formation in unconstrained contexts

We refer to *unconstrained contexts* as those wherein people are relatively free to choose their relational partners. When considering relationship formation, the general process of *social comparison* is well documented (Festinger, 1957). Social comparison may result in *social selection* (Leenders, 1997; Robins, Elliott, & Pattison, 2001) when persons select certain social partners based on their individual

attributes or behaviors. We argue that it is not agreement on attributes, attitudes, or behaviors *per se* that counts in social selection but a degree of concordance in underlying wishes, aspirations, duties, and obligations (i.e., the ideal and the ought self-guides). Consistent with the assumptions of Davis and Rusbult (2001), we contend that individuals interpret attitudinal and behavioral agreement as indicators of shared values, aspirations, and obligations. It is important to note that this hypothesis is about shared self-guides, not about shared self-discrepancies. Accordingly, it is possible for two individuals with quite different self-discrepancies to form a relationship on the basis of perceptions of shared self-guides.

In proposing that individuals use perceptions of shared self-guides as the basis of relationships, we acknowledge that in some cases these perceptions may not be accurate. Indeed, there is a whole tradition of research that has focused on accuracy in person perception (e.g., Kenny & Albright, 1987; Swann, 1984). This research has demonstrated that, rather than some individuals being more accurate than others, it is more appropriate to ask under what conditions perceptions of others are accurate (Kenny, Kieffer, Smith, Ceplenski, & Kulo, 1996), and, more specifically, do individuals display global or circumscribed accuracy (Swann, 1984) or perceiver, generalized, or dyadic accuracy (Kenny, 1994; Kenny & la Voie, 1985). Thus, it is entirely plausible that, at least in some cases and to some degree, individuals may form impressions of the potential partners' self-aspects that are simply reflections of the content of their own self-aspects. However, we contend that, for the most part, this is not the case in longer-term relationships.<sup>6</sup> One of our core arguments is that relationships involve cooperation towards aspects of the world beyond the dyad. This implies that more than just reflection is involved, especially as individual aspirations

and obligations are likely to be associated with observable behaviors. Of course, it is possible that one partner in a dyad may be engaged in long term deceit about personal aspirations and obligations, and may tailor their observable behaviors to this end. But most relationships do not have this quality.

For these reasons, we argue that individuals are motivated, and are able, to form relatively accurate impressions of others (Kenny, 1994), especially of longer-term relational partners. There is some evidence to support this hypothesis. Kenny and Acitelli (2001) found that partners in close relationships are both accurate and biased in their perceptions of each other. Likewise, Hayes and Dunning (1997) found that, while the extent of self-peer agreement about the possession of traits depended on the number of behavioral referents associated with a trait (and, thus, the traits' ambiguity), this was moderated by the level of friendship between the peers.

Thus, as a reviewer of this paper has quite rightly pointed out, the issue of perception and reality in relationship research is difficult, a fact acknowledged as early as the 1950s by Cronbach (1955). Much of what we discuss below is, indeed, focused on the perceptions of one partner within a relationship, but it is not our intention to see perceptions of discrepancies, as distinct from "real" discrepancies, as the driver of our approach. As noted above, we consider it important to consider relationships as, in part, cooperative endeavors or shared responses in an external world, and not just a dynamic within a dyad. Cooperation requires, at least, some level of actual "sharedness" that goes beyond perceptions (otherwise it is simply not cooperation). Of course, people may misperceive their relational partners in various ways, and this is especially so in the early stages of relationship formation, as we discuss immediately below. But our argument for long-term relationships is that

individuals gain sufficient behavioral information about their partners to formulate realistic notions, for instance, of the extent to which they can rely on their partners to work towards a given aspiration, or of the extent to which they can expect their partner to adhere to a particular obligation. To the degree that this is so, people's perceptions of relational discrepancies in longer-term relationships have a basis in evidence, and are not merely projections of their own personal aspirations and qualities.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, of course, there are empirical questions here that are worthy of examination, as we note in our conclusions.

We begin, however, not with arguments about longer-term relationships, but about relationship formation. When two people meet for the first time, misperceptions are clearly more likely, especially in circumstances where individuals may be cautious about non-disclosure of personal information. In initial stages of relationship formation, individuals may ground information in socially "safe" ways, often by employing a "positive politeness" strategy to confirm shared common ground and increase the sense of social connection (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In these circumstances, limited and perhaps misleading information about a possible partner may affect the accuracy of an individual's perceptions. Nevertheless, we contend that the individuals are searching for evidence of some level of "sharedness" (commensurability) that can form the basis of a possible relationship (even allowing for suggestions that individuals may first screen for differences before focusing on similarities – Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986).

Accordingly in advancing our first proposition about relationship formation we essentially follow Higgins (1987) in concentrating on perceived matches.

*Proposition 1:* Initial relationship formation is based on perceptions of the degree of consistent commensurability between the actual self and self-guides across individuals.

Of course, individuals meet in contexts, not in vacuums, so that perceptions of commensurability may be influenced by the social setting of the meeting, with certain qualities made more salient in certain contexts. More specifically, when two individuals first meet, the principal (and possibly very limited) information that one has about the other is aspects of the other's actual self as expressed in terms of behavior and exchange of self-information within the context of the meeting. In exchanging personal information, individuals may temper the strength of certain goals and standards, in order to frame information about themselves in socially safe ways. So in this early stage, individuals have even less information to make judgements about any discrepancies that may exist between self-guides (as distinct from actual selves), so relational discrepancies may not be immediately apparent. For example, if a person with aspirations relating to intelligence meets someone who appears to be an actual genius, there will be a tendency for admiration arising from the consistent commensurability between the perceived actual self of the other, on the one hand, and of the person's aspiration on the other, irrespective of any discrepancies that might be implicated through the self guides of the other.

*Proposition 1a:* An individual will be motivated to form a relationship with another if there is high consistent commensurability between the individual's perceptions of the other's actual self and the individual's actual self or self-

guides. The meaning that the individual attributes to this relationship will differ depending on the source of high commensurability.

Table 1 describes the initial interpretations the individual will give to the putative relationship in terms of the source of commensurability between the other's actual self and his/her actual self or self-guides. We assume that the feelings experienced when commensurability is perceived are positive. Thus, commensurability with one's actual self results in feelings of familiarity, since the other is similar to self. However, commensurability between the other's actual self and one's self-guides result in feelings that reflect the nature of the self-guide. As a result, believing the other possesses the same attributes as one believes one ought to have (i.e., the ought self-guide) leads to feelings of approval while believing the other possesses the same attributes as one would like to possess (i.e., the ideal self-guide) leads to feelings of admiration.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Indirect evidence for this proposition comes from research examining friendship formation. This research has focused considerable theoretical and empirical attention on the effects of attribute similarity as a generator of friendship (Duck, 1983; Rubin, 1980), a process often associated with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971, 1997). More generally, as Robins, Elliott, and Pattison (2001) pointed out, examples of *similarity* or *homophily hypotheses* abound in theoretical expositions of relational and group processes (Elliott, 2000; Leenders,

1997; Zeggelink, 1995). Robins et al. also noted the considerable empirical and conceptual support marshalled for the association between friendship and agreement, in particular (e.g., Duck, 1983; Erwin, 1993; Kupersmidt, DeRosier, & Patterson, 1995; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999; Zeggelink, 1995).

Regarding relationship stability across time, however, we advance the following proposition, as a natural extension of Balance Theory (Heider, 1946), since high commensurability implies a balanced relationship.

*Proposition 2:* Dyadic relationships will be more stable, the higher the level of consistent commensurability of ideal and ought self-guides across the persons in the dyad.

Note that this proposition is about “actual” commensurability, whereas our first proposition related to perceptions, reflecting our argument that cooperation and shared responses in an external world require some “actual” level of sharedness, and that this has implications for the longer-term sustainability of the relationship. Commensurability of the ideal and ought self-guides is more crucial than commensurability of actual selves for relationship stability because the individual’s self-guides are positively-valued reference values for self, namely those outcomes that represent the presence of positive outcomes (i.e., the ideal self-guide) and the absence of negative outcomes (i.e., the ought self-guide). In contrast, one’s actual self may not be positively valued, specifically if it is discrepant or not commensurable with one’s self-guides. As a result, commensurability of actual selves does not necessarily contribute to relationship stability. Consistent with this proposition is Sanderson and

Evans' (2001) contention that individuals, because they wish to fulfill their goals (i.e., achieve congruence with the self-guides), choose partners who will help them fulfill these goals rather than partners who are similar to self.

Over time in unconstrained environments, when there are high levels of commensurability across self-guides and a stable relationship, the individual has more opportunity to give deeper attention to how the other perceives him or her. This "mirror" image (i.e., the individual's beliefs about how the other perceives his/her actual self – in the language of SDT, the actual (other)) is comfortable for the individual, only if there is a level of trust. At the same time, beliefs about what the other believes one would ideally like to do (i.e., the ideal-other self-guide) and the other thinks one should or ought to do (i.e., the ought-other self-guide) form.

*Proposition 3:* Dyadic relationships are more intimate and trusting, the higher the level of consistent commensurability of actual self and perceptions of the other's view of the actual self.

We base this proposition on the argument that the perception of similarity in actual selves leads to perceptions that the partner will behave in a similar manner to self, promoting beliefs that the partners can be relied on to behave in a benevolent manner and be responsive to one's needs, essential in the development of trust (Sorrentino, Holmes, Hanna, & Sharp, 1995; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Table 2 describes the interpretations that the individual will give to a stable relationship in terms of the source of commensurability between his/her self-guides and perceptions of those of the other.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Again, these interpretations are based on the assumption that perceptions of commensurability lead to positive feelings. We discussed above the feelings of trust and intimacy that we propose occur when the other's view of self is perceived as commensurable with one's own view of self. When the ought self-guides are perceived to be commensurable, the individual perceives the other as someone with the same beliefs about obligations and duties. For example, the individual might perceive that the other shares his/her beliefs that one ought to be caring and trustworthy. This is a basis on which the individual can seek to deal with or work with the other, in the sense that s/he feels the other has a similar understanding of what is appropriate in a given situation. Thus, the individual experiences feelings of justification in the form of confirmation about his/her own obligations. Likewise, commensurability implies the other is perceived as someone with the same wishes and aspirations. For example, the individual might believe that the other shares their ideals of being knowledgeable and confident. This is a basis on which the individual can seek to cooperate with the other, in the sense of seeking the same ends. In this case,

for instance, they can cooperate in activities that might allow confidence and knowledge to be expressed or developed.

In summary, our theory assumes that initial relationship formation and maintenance is based around the individual's perceptions of commensurability of one's own and the other's self-aspects. Depending on which self-aspects are commensurable, different interpretations are made about the relationship. In addition, with time and high levels of commensurability, beliefs about the other's view of one's actual self and the self-guides develop. It is at this time that the emotional consequences of any discrepancies with these "other" self-guides will be experienced and self-regulatory strategies used to ameliorate these emotions. However, this hypothesis of the "late" emergence of these "other" discrepancies is not meant to diminish their impact on emotions and behavior. Because of the investment made in the relationship to this point, the individual is reluctant to leave the relationship if any discrepancies and resultant negative emotions are present. Rather, what occurs is the individual takes the "path of least resistance" and attempts to reduce these discrepancies using either cognitive or behavioral measures (see Davis & Rusbult, 2001, for an account of how discrepancies in relational partners' attitudes can be reduced).

#### Relationships in unconstrained environments: Discrepancies in ongoing relationships

The propositions developed thus far relate to relationship formation and maintenance in response to consistent commensurability. However, as noted above, high commensurability (i.e., a large intersection of qualities in the individuals' self-aspects) does not preclude the presence of discrepancies (i.e., differences in the extent

of qualities possessed). We now consider the effect of these discrepancies in the presence of high consistent commensurability.

*Proposition 4:* Relational discrepancies have emotional consequences that may destabilise a relationship unless the individuals take cognitive action to reinterpret the relationship in ways that express the discrepancies. This often involves the adoption of roles in the relationship.

Just as self-discrepancies have emotional consequences, we propose that relational discrepancies have emotional consequences. The nature of these emotions is consistent with those of self-discrepancies proposed by SDT. Thus, we assume that individuals would experience similar emotions when perceiving a discrepancy between the actual self and the other's ideal self as those experienced when any AI self-discrepancy exists, that is dejection-related emotions. Likewise, a discrepancy between an individual's actual self and the other's ought self would result in agitation-related emotions. Moreover, because these discrepancies are relational, we would expect the emotion implicated to be interpersonal emotions, such as anger and threat, examined by Francis and Jackson (in press). However, at this stage in our theorizing we do not make specific predictions about the exact nature of emotions experienced in response to particular types of relational discrepancy.

We now develop propositions about dyadic relationships, based on possible patterns of relational discrepancies. As we are considering established and relatively stable relationships in unconstrained contexts, we assume moderate to high consistent commensurability of actual selves and self-guides. Throughout this discussion we

again concentrate on one individual's perceptions of discrepancies and the resultant effect on the dyadic relationship.

As an extension of proposition 2, we propose that relationships will be shaped by the pattern of discrepancies across individuals in ideal and ought self-guides, and actual selves. We consider the possibility of these comparisons being discrepant or non-discrepant. This allows eight possibilities. The results are summarized in Table 3, with each cell in the Table discussed below.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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#### Dyadic relationships in unconstrained contexts

Discrepancies may or may not occur in all self-aspects (i.e., actual selves, ideal and ought self-guides). The perception of discrepancies in commensurable attributes brings negative consequences. Perceived discrepancies in ideal self-guides indicate the other is someone with different levels of wishes and aspirations, so while this is a basis for cooperation, the difference diminishes the possibilities for alliance. Likewise, discrepant ought self-guides signify that the other is someone with different levels of desired obligations. For example, one individual might believe that s/he ought to be extremely caring and trustworthy while the other might believe that s/he ought to be only moderately caring and trustworthy. Thus, the feelings of justification experienced are tinged with knowledge that the other does not share one's belief about the level of the obligation. Finally with discrepant actual selves, the individual

perceives the other to possess different quantities of the commensurable actual attributes, leading to the situation in which the other is perceived to either be “better” or “worse” than self. The exact meaning of each type of discrepancy depends on whether it is self or other who is perceived to have more stringent/higher aspirations or obligations or to possess more of the relevant attribute. For example, the perception of more stringent obligations (i.e., the ought self-guide) may lead to feelings of moral superiority whereas the perception of less stringent aspirations may lead to feelings of inadequacy.

Although it is possible to specify the outcomes of particular types of relational discrepancies, the consequences for the relationship between the individuals can only be fully understood when we consider the pattern of congruencies and discrepancies across all self-aspects. These will now be briefly explored. Because we see the self-guides as central to the development of cooperation in a relationship, we have structured this discussion around congruent ideal self-guides to begin with, and then go on to consider discrepancies in this self-guide.<sup>8</sup> For most of the eight cells of Table 3, we merely sketch some possible outcomes. We spend most time in discussion of discrepant actual selves in the presence of congruent ideals and ought self-guides to illustrate our thinking in somewhat greater detail.

*(a) Congruencies in actual selves and in ideal and ought self-guides:* Perceived congruencies across all self-aspects provide a basis for the individual to seek a close relationship. This does not preclude, of course, the two individuals sharing within-person discrepancies. For example, rather than being perceived to be moderately knowledgeable and confident, an individual might perceive that both s/he and the other are lacking in knowledge and confidence (possibly an AI discrepancy).

However, regardless of whether there were within-person discrepancies, one's actual self would not be discrepant with the actual self of the relational partner (i.e., the A [own] : A [other] comparison), thus motivating a close and trusting relationship between the individuals.<sup>9</sup>

*(b) Discrepancies in actual selves in the presence of congruent ideal and ought self-guides:* The perception of discrepant actual selves changes the nature of the relationship between the individuals markedly from that discussed above. Here the individual perceives the other to be different. With congruent ideal and ought self-guides, discrepant actual selves suggests within-person AO and/or AI discrepancies. For example, the individual might believe that s/he and the other share a belief that they should be extremely caring and trustworthy and that they would like to be moderately knowledgeable and confident. However, one person may be perceived to be only moderately caring and not at all knowledgeable.

An individual who is discrepant with the self-guides, will not only have self-discrepancies, but will also likely consider the other a "better" person, in terms of living up to ideals and/or in terms of duties and obligations. The relationship will be a constant reminder of his/her perceived inadequacies, an aversive emotional situation that will only be ameliorated if the individual takes cognitive or behavioral action. In unconstrained contexts, leaving the relationship is a possibility, even though, the large commensurability is motivation to stay. An alternative cognitive strategy is to interpret the relationship in terms of differing roles for self and other. If the individual is prepared to accord the other a "leadership" role and to adopt a "follower" role, the aversive emotional reactions may be ameliorated and the relationship sustained.

In contrast, if it is the other who is perceived to be more discrepant, with the individual perceiving self-congruence, s/he will consider him/herself to be a “better” person, in terms of living up to ideals and/or in terms of duties and obligations. A relationship with the other will be a pleasant (and constant) reminder of his/her “superiority”. In this case, s/he may be motivated to maintain the relationship and expect the other to take the “follower” role while he/she assumes the “leadership” role.

Thus, we argue that formalizing relational discrepancies into established and accepted roles diminishes the emotional consequences because patterns of relational responses and behaviors are routinized and made predictable. In summary, what we have in this condition of a discrepancy in actual selves are instances of how perceived interpersonal discrepancies may be formalized into status differentials. This notion of exchange is similar to that discussed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). They argued that while status reflects the relative level of outcomes between individuals, a low status individual can “participate vicariously in privileges and satisfactions enjoyed by the higher status person” (p. 48). Likewise, more recently Aron, Norman, and Aron (1998) demonstrated that including the other in the self (i.e., self-expansion) can expand the resources, perspectives, and identities available for accomplishing goals and consequent positive emotions.

Thus, the exchange of status for routinized predictability and lowered emotional reactions is an interesting example of exchange, which we contend is always a possibility in the presence of discrepancies. For instance, there will be cases where within person discrepancies are not in the same direction (e.g., at the same time as an individual has an AO discrepancy, s/he may perceive that the other does not live

up to their shared ideals). Again it is possible for an exchange of roles but of a somewhat different kind, with the individual providing leadership on wishes and aspirations, but with the other being the model for duties and obligations. As a result, a discrepancy in actual selves opens the possibility of the two individuals working in a team-like way, with the two adopting different roles to reflect their various strengths in different circumstances.

We also posit here the possibility of what we term *cognitive exchange*, somewhat akin to the self-expansion notion of Aron et al. (1998) noted above. Clearly individuals cannot directly exchange self-qualities, but they may perceive themselves as in some sense sharing qualities with a dyadic partner in a close relationship. Cognitive exchange involves the individual not concentrating on his/her own self-discrepancies, but focusing on the combined self-discrepancies of the dyad; it is a shift from an “I” perspective (personal) to a “we” perspective (dyadic). The impact of such shifts in perception have been investigated by a number of researchers. For example, Agnew, Rusbult, Van-Lange, and Langston (1998) found that perceptions of “we” were associated with a strong commitment to a romantic relationship. Likewise, a “couple” identity (the tendency to see oneself as part of a specific relationship, “we-ness”) moderates the link between positive relationship thinking and relationship satisfaction (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999) and between equity and satisfaction in relationships (Medvene, Teal, & Slavich, 2000).

Adopting the shared perspective may diminish the emotional consequences of a personal discrepancy. This may be a prominent feature in cases of extreme status differential, where the “follower” may be motivated to stay in the relationship with the “leader”, because the dyadic perspective diminishes the otherwise heavy

emotional burden of extreme self-discrepancies. In this way, individuals may become “fans” or “disciples” to perceived “stars” or “gurus”.

Our notion of cognitive exchange has some similarities to the concept of reflection from the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model (e.g., Tesser, 1991). Reflection is an attempt by an individual to raise self-evaluation through the good performance of close others on a dimension of evaluation that is relatively unimportant to self. The reflection process is dominant when the other’s performance is much better than one’s own performance (which also may be a condition for the adoption of a “follower” role.) Using this terminology, our argument essentially is that the adoption of certain roles by individuals within a relationship may be a mechanism whereby the negative emotions arising from comparison processes may be ameliorated, thereby allowing reflection processes to have greater impact. (Below we point to a negative form of cognitive exchange - which we term *malignant cognitive exchange* - whereby the role adoption may allow an individual in a relationship to project their own inadequacies onto the other. In an extension of the arguments of SEM, this might be seen as boosting self-evaluation not by reflection of the other’s good performance but by the transference of one’s poor performance.)

In summary, then, we point to two possible cognitive mechanisms that may come into play to ameliorate the negative emotional consequences of relational discrepancies: the adoption of hierarchical roles and the adoption of a shared perspective (i.e., cognitive exchange).

(c) *Discrepant ought self-guides in the presence of congruent ideal self-guides and actual selves:* With discrepant ought self-guides, the individual sees the other as someone with different levels of duties and obligations. For example, one individual

might believe that s/he ought to be extremely caring and trustworthy while the other might believe that s/he need be only moderately caring and trustworthy. With non-discrepant ideal self-guides and actual selves, discrepant ought self-guides points to a perceived within person AO self-discrepancy for (at least) one person. An individual who perceives that the other has the “more demanding” duties and obligations (perhaps unnecessarily demanding) is continually vulnerable to judgment from the other and, thus, the relationship may be aversive. The aversive emotional consequences of the relationship may be ameliorated if the individual adopts the role of submissive “inferior”, at the same time as attempting to hide aspects of his or her own behaviors that might emphasize the discrepancy. That is, there may be a resultant loss of intimacy in the relationship. For the other to adopt the role of “superior” and exercise judgment over the individual will diminish the agitation-related emotion from the other’s internal AO discrepancy. In this way, the other projects his or her own perceived inadequacies onto the individual, which can be interpreted as a form of malignant cognitive exchange.

*(d) Discrepant actual selves and ought self-guides in the presence of congruent ideal self-guides:* In this case, it may be that neither partner has personal AO discrepancies, so that the punishing and judgmental aspects of the relationship, described above, may not be apparent. Nevertheless, there is still likely to be a personal AI discrepancy, with the emotional consequences again perhaps ameliorated by the formation of a status differential.

*(e) Discrepant ideal self-guides in the presence of congruent ought self-guides and actual selves:* As noted above, the presence of discrepant ideal self-guides diminishes the possibilities for cooperation. Thus, we would expect these

relationships to be less stable. However, the presence of congruencies in ought self-guides and actual selves implies the presence of a personal AI (but not an AO) discrepancy. Suppose the individual sees the other as a person with “higher” ideals. We would expect the individual to respond by diminishing the other’s scrutiny, with an increased A (own) : A (other) discrepancy.

*(f) Discrepant actual selves and ideal self-guides in the presence of congruent ought self-guides:* If the individual has a personal AO discrepancy, the other’s presence is likely to increase the individual’s level of negative interpersonal emotion. Again we may see a relationship based on judgment and punishment, although if the other does not have an AO discrepancy, then any tendency towards malignant cognitive exchange may be diminished.

*(g) Discrepant ideal and ought self-guides in the present of congruent actual selves:* With both discrepant ideal and ought self-guides, this type of relationship would appear to be plagued by potential problems. Possibilities for both alliance and cooperation are diminished. Stable relationships may be formed but on a relatively superficial basis, with high “other” self-discrepancies

*(h) Discrepant actual selves and ideal and ought self-guides:* These relationships can be expected to be superficial, perhaps based principally on exchange, and with large A (own) : A (other) discrepancies. Note that these relationships could include those between two individuals with no internal self-discrepancies. However, we argue that two individuals with no self-discrepancies do not necessarily have close relationships. For instance, we supervise a number of postgraduate students whose principal motivation relates to professional training but who are, nevertheless, required to complete some original research. We have self-

guides relating to research and (we hope) our actual selves are not too discrepant from those self-guides. The same can be said of these students. Yet, while they acknowledge the validity of research in general, their actual performance in research matches a more limited set of research aims and obligations, something that is quite appropriate to their broader professional goals. The absence of self-discrepancies in both partners in the supervisor-supervisee relationship does not imply a close research relationship in these cases, especially when these relationships are compared with those with other students who have stronger personal aspirations towards research.

#### Dyadic relationships in constrained environments

Social contexts provide not just opportunities for individuals (e.g., in selecting certain others as relational partners) but also present constraints of various types. In some more constrained social contexts, an individual may be pushed into relationships with certain others, even though in a less constrained context the person may not select them as partners.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in work environments, individuals often find themselves with supervisors and colleagues who are potential foci of comparison but whose qualities in terms of self-guides may not be highly commensurable with their own. Short of leaving the job, the employee is constrained to continue such relationships and to the continual comparison of self-guides with these particular others. We argue that an “imposed”, but less than optimal, self-guide in a relational partner may have implications not just for the individual’s interpretation of the relationship, but also possibly of the constraining context itself. For instance, resolution of such conflict may involve a cognitive reappraisal of current context, affecting relationships and motivation towards collective goals.

Constrained social environments may not only be provided by exogenous social entities, such as organizations. These may also arise when longstanding relationships reveal aspects of the individuals that were not immediately apparent. The cost of dismantling a long-term friendship, for instance, is often quite high, so that the very history of an individual's social experience may itself be constraining. When individuals are constrained in selecting current others, but are aware of some discordance in fundamental self-guides, they may engage in *social influence* processes (Friedkin, 1998; Leenders, 1997; Moscovici, 1985; Robins, Pattison, & Elliott, 2001) in an attempt to change the attitudes of problematic dyadic partners. Davis and Rusbult (2001) demonstrated a complementary process in dating relationships. When individuals in their studies became aware of discrepancies between their own and their partners' attitudes, they tended to engage in *attitude alignment*, the process whereby individuals change their attitudes to make them more consistent with those of their partners.

Likewise, in highly constrained contexts, such as workplaces, there are often formal or informal processes of socialization to serve such purposes (Levine & Moreland, 1991). Successful social influence in such environments leads to the establishment of group norms (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985) and may contribute to the shaping and sustenance of organizational culture (Schein, 1985). As Leenders (1997) pointed out, in most circumstances social influence and social selection occur in parallel, but we argue that the nature of the context (i.e., more or less constraining) decides which of the two processes is likely to predominate.

In constrained environments there are at least two versions of social influence. Typically, people are influenced by those to whom they are socially close, such as

friends (Robins, Pattison, & Elliott, 2001). However, people may also develop similar attitudes and behaviors to those who occupy similar positions within a given social structure (*structural equivalents*). The similarity of equivalents has been empirically observed in various circumstances (for instance, the diffusion of innovations, Burt, 1987). Shah (1998) found that individuals choose close partners and equivalents as comparison others for quite different purposes.

Several mechanisms for influence through structural equivalence are possible. People in similar positions may be subject to similar pressures and hence react in similar ways. Alternatively, people may more carefully monitor others who are in similar positions and model their behavior accordingly. An elaboration of the self-categorization theory of Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) could provide a further mechanism. In self-categorization theory, when an individual adopts a social identity (i.e., they are a member of a particular social group or category and that membership becomes part of self) and that identity becomes salient, “a shift in perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away for the perception of self as a unique person” (Turner et al., 1987, p. 50) occurs. This adoption involves self-stereotyping and behaving in ways that are consistent with the perceived group norm. With structural equivalence, we are not considering formal groups or categories, but it may be that in the right circumstances an identity could become associated with certain structurally equivalent positions, so that individuals in those positions could perceive common behaviors as norms and appropriate them accordingly.

In summary, in constrained contexts, we cannot assume that only socially close individuals (*proximates*) will be those with whom individuals have

“relationships”. We also need to consider the *equivalents* that may be present because of the context. In work environments, for instance, *proximates* may include not just fellow work colleagues, but also employers and supervisors, so imposed hierarchies may be important. *Equivalents* may be people of the same work status (e.g., of similar rank or job-description.)

Organizations typically impose a set of status differentials on the individuals within them. A collective environment also makes salient different aspects of self-guides. For instance, shared organizational goals, norms, and culture become prominent, and can be considered as relating to important features of self-guides.

(a) *Relations with proximates*: Imposed relationships may fit quite naturally into the above description of relationship maintenance in unconstrained environments. For instance, work colleagues who have non-discrepant ideal and ought self-guides and actual selves are likely to form close working relationships. Supervisors who live up to high shared aspirations and obligations are likely to be admired by their subordinates, and the imposed status differential will reflect the type of status differential that might have emerged even if the environment had been much less constrained.

An important difference between constrained and unconstrained environments, however, is that, apart from the aspects of the self-guides that might be shared because of the collective environment, relationships imposed by organizations do not guarantee high levels of commensurability.<sup>11</sup> The individual may be placed under the scrutiny of a supervisor, with a putative AO (other) discrepancy, but incommensurability between the two ought self-guides may mean that the individual does not see the supervisor’s ought self-guide as an appropriate standard of

comparison. Here the status differential may not match what would emerge in an unconstrained environment.

AO (other) discrepancies result in the interpersonal agitation-related emotions and this may, indeed, be the outcome in the organizational environment, especially with the supervisor in a position of power to exercise some level of sanction against the individual. More importantly, the employee may reinterpret the relationship with the supervisor to emphasize the imposed “role” aspects of it, with a consequent diminishing of personal involvement. At the same time, the employee may come to interpret the context itself as one of aversive emotional consequences. So the employee may withdraw personal investment in the organization, treating involvement as formulaic with a concentration on behaviors appropriate to roles, rather than on motivated engagement. Accordingly, the supervisor’s scrutiny of the employee may have the desired effect of altering behavior, at least at a superficial level, but at the cost of a demotivation of the employee.

*(b) Relations with equivalents:* An individual may perceive many different types of equivalents in the same organization, for example, people doing the same type of work or people occupying the same organizational level. Equivalents may be, but need not be, proximates. Accordingly, a person need not have a direct relationship with a person who is an equivalent. In this case, some relational discrepancies lack the force that might apply in the case of proximates.

Accordingly, we argue that the main focus for comparison with equivalents who are not proximates is that of actual selves. When an individual regards an other as an equivalent, then an A (own) : A (other) discrepancy may suggest that either individual or the other is not living up to organizational aspirations (i.e., the

organizational “ideal”) and/or obligations (i.e., the organizational “ought”). In either case, this is aversive for the individual. It may be that the individual thinks that the other is not worthy of being an equivalent, with the resultant belief that the other is overcompensated because of his/her lesser performance. Alternatively, the individual may be concerned about being demoted or disregarded in comparison to the other. If they are not proximates, then the individual actually has little information about the other and must rely on relatively visible organizational information. Accordingly there is a tendency for the individual to follow the other’s overt organizational behaviors, for instance, adopting innovations that the other adopts (Burt, 1987), or abiding by norms that the other follows. In more general terms, we may see elements of competition among equivalents; indeed, we see competition as arising principally in contexts that have some degree of constraint. (There are constrained relationships – e.g., Tesser, 1991, gives an example of competitive siblings – where high commensurability may emphasize the competitive elements in the relationship. Indeed, as Tesser notes, without commensurability there is no competition; at the same time, we argue that commensurability is important to ensure that the relationship is close, beyond the constraint of being a sibling.)<sup>12</sup>

#### Triadic and higher order structures

We now briefly consider relational discrepancies beyond dyadic relationships. Our basic point is that the theorizing we have engaged in at the dyadic level does not simply stop there, but has implications for larger social structures. Dyads themselves will build up particular structures based on the self-configurations of their constituent individuals.

In unconstrained environments, we expect to see processes leading to structural balance (Cartwright & Harary, 1956), whereby two individuals in a status relationship with the same third person may come to form a relationship. Two individuals, who both treat a third person as a “guru”, both have discrepancies of some sort with this third person, but may have no discrepancies between themselves. In this case we would predict a potentially close relationship. When we see such processes at the local level then there are implications for overall social structure, setting up global patterns that reflect various forms of clustering and hierarchy (e.g., Johnsen, 1986; Pattison & Robins, 2002).

In constrained environments, the theory we have outlined fits in well with several theories of organizational behavior. For instance, consider a supervisor with two subordinates. For a supervisor, a major concern is subordinate behavior in relation to organizational obligations, in other words “ought” behaviors. If both subordinates occupy similar positions in relation to the individual, then their organizational duties and obligations will be similar, i.e., the ought self-guides. In that case, the individual will in effect pay attention to a discrepancy between the actual selves of the two subordinates (a discrepancy effect involving three people that clearly cannot occur in a dyad.) If such a discrepancy exists, the individual will differentiate between the two subordinates, treating one more favorably than the other. If there are more than two individuals who are subordinates of the individual, this process, when combined with processes of structural balance, is likely to result in in-groups of favored, and out-groups of unfavored, subordinates of the individual, the prediction of Leader-Member Exchange theory (e.g., Sparrowe & Liden, 1997).

Another interesting discrepancy that is not possible in dyads is that of a discrepancy in the individual's perception of two others' ought self-guides. Here the individual perceives that the two others have different beliefs about what they ought to do, perceptions that may be irreconcilable. Because it is the perceptions of others that conflict, the individual's cognitive reinterpretation of the relationships may not be enough to resolve the discrepancy, especially if the relationships with the two others are already close. The example of Krackhardt (1992), who described a worker with close ties to colleagues who took diametrically opposed positions in a unionization campaign, illustrates such a discrepancy. The worker's eventual solution was to resign from the firm.

### **Empirical support**

The thrust of this paper is explicitly theoretical and it has not been our immediate goal to provide empirical justification for all the propositions we have presented. Rather, we have sought to develop a theoretical framework wherein we can explore some important relational consequences of SDT. The next step of course is to examine our various proposals empirically. By outlining our theory at this stage, we hope to stimulate others to participate in this research endeavor.

Nevertheless, a preliminary pilot study that bears upon our core argument described above has been conducted. We report the results of this study here in summary form (for further details, see Croyle, 2001). A questionnaire survey of 61 members of sporting teams was conducted because it was assumed that the team environment results in a degree of shared team-based aspirations and obligations (i.e., ideals and ought self-guides). Participants were asked consider their relationships with

*two* other members of the team, one with a “similar” actual self and one with a “different” actual self. Participants were asked to list five ideal and five ought self-guide characteristics that were relevant to team membership. As noted above, it was assumed that in this context (i.e., a sporting team) individuals would share these characteristics and, thus, the ideal and ought self-guides relating to the team would be congruent<sup>13</sup>. Thus, of interest were perceived discrepancies in actual selves. Participants were asked to indicate the positions of their own and their “similar” and “different” team members’ actual selves on a continuum between each characteristic and its bipolar opposite. This method of assessing discrepancies is the self-lines method of Francis, Boldero, Newson, Brydon, and Coffey (2000). Participants also responded to items from Haslam and Fiske’s (1999) scale that assesses Fiske’s (1992) relational models. It was assumed that the extent to which a relationship was described as authority ranking indicated the development of hierarchy, whereas the extent to which it was described as communal sharing indicated a shift to a shared perspective (i.e, cognitive exchange). Two versions of the authority ranking items were used, one to indicate the degree to which the participant was the leader in the relationship and the other to indicate the degree to which s/he was the follower. Finally, the extent to which participants were experiencing various interpersonal emotions, using Francis’ (2000) Feelings Scale, was assessed.

Relational discrepancies were taken as the mean distance between participants’ own possession of the five ideal and ought attributes and those of their relational partners. As expected, participants were consistent in producing larger relational discrepancies for different than for similar team members. Likewise, positive interpersonal emotions were stronger for similar team members, whereas

negative interpersonal emotions were stronger for different team members, supporting the notion that, in general, larger relational discrepancies are associated with negative emotions.

In a more detailed examination of the impact of discrepancies in the actual selves of relational partners, the sample was divided into two categories: those who reported their “different” team members as “better” ( $n = 20$ ) and those who reported them as “worse” ( $n = 41$ ) in terms of living up to ideals.<sup>14</sup> For the group with “better” team members, the magnitude of the ideal relational discrepancy (RDI) predicted a significant 27% of the variance in authority ranking (follower), so that participants with larger relational discrepancies saw themselves as adopting the follower role to a greater extent. For this group, the relational discrepancy did not predict negative interpersonal emotions. In contrast, for the group with “worse” team members, RDI did not predict hierarchy (authority ranking), but rather predicted the negative interpersonal emotion, anger. Larger relational discrepancies indicated more anger, but this was moderated by higher levels of communal sharing.<sup>15</sup> Larger relational discrepancies also predicted increased conflict for this group.

So in this small sample we have two effects. When an individual sees their team member (i.e., the “other”) as better in terms of actual selves, relational discrepancies relate to measures of hierarchy, but not to emotion. When an individual sees their team member as worse, relational discrepancies relate to emotion, not hierarchy, moderated by high levels of communal sharing (which we take to indicate a shared perspective or cognitive exchange). Although we would not wish to draw too much from such a preliminary study, there are indications here that relational discrepancies are associated with negative emotional outcomes, but that these

outcomes may be tempered by a reinterpretation of the relationship in terms of hierarchy, or in terms of a shared perspective (cognitive exchange).<sup>16</sup> That we were able to explain a substantial proportion of the variance given a relatively small sample suggests that these effects may be strong. This preliminary study gives us grounds for optimism about the soundness of our core argument.

### **Conclusions**

The present paper has argued that consideration of relational discrepancies – particular combinations of discrepancies that exist between an individual’s perceptions of self-aspects and those of relational partners – offers a potentially useful conceptual tool for understanding different types of interpersonal relationships and the outcomes of these relationships for the individuals. Using as our basis self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989a, 1989b) and drawing on aspects of social network, sociological, and organizational literatures, we have argued that the outcomes of comparisons beyond, but including, the actual selves of individuals, have important consequences for relationships. Specifically, we have elucidated how different types of relationships may form and the types of strategies that the relational partners use to maintain these relationships. We have argued that strategies, such as ascribing to a partner a “leadership” or “follower” role, or shifting to a perspective that concentrates on the overall qualities of the dyad, allow the maintenance of these relationships.

We see our theoretical approach as having two particular strengths. First, it expands the domain of self-discrepancy theory in a natural way into social relationship and social structural theory, with potential sociological and organizational

applications. Secondly, it grounds an account of the emergence of social structure in the psychological motivations of individuals seeking to escape or reinterpret emotional consequences of perceived discrepancies. (There is further theoretical work to do here, in that we have often concentrated on the individual's perceptions of a relationship. An elaboration would consider both relational partners' perceptions of discrepancies simultaneously, and such work could include examination of correct and incorrect perceptions of sharedness in long-term relationships.) As social researchers, we certainly need theories of how relationships and social structures emerge, but an understanding of the cognitive and emotional motivations for individuals to sustain such structures is often elusive. We believe that self-discrepancy theory, as elaborated in our relational discrepancy theory, may provide a basis for such an understanding.

Of course, we have only provided the bare bones of a theory that could be further developed. For instance, our discussion of constrained environments has not been exhaustive, and our consideration of triadic and higher order structures even more limited. As we have noted above, our dyadic theory, expressed above, is often focussed on the individual's perceptions and takes into account the other's perceptions only in passing. More work also needs to be done on inconsistent commensurability, to which we did not give attention above. Our initial thoughts are that inconsistent commensurability is likely to lead to conflict and, hence, in unconstrained environments is a possible basis for the avoidance of relationships with certain others. In constrained environments, inconsistent commensurability in imposed relationships may have particularly deleterious effects for individuals, not just for the dyad but also for third parties in triadic structures, as the example of Krackhardt (1992), discussed

above, might suggest. Our preliminary study also suggests that there may be differences depending on the direction of a relational discrepancy, and more thought needs to be given to such possibilities.

Overall, then, there is much further work that can be developed from our approach. Our intent here has been to provide some basic propositions as a starting point and to sketch how such theorizing could be further pursued. Our argument is that self-discrepancy theory has direct implications for relationship formation and maintenance, with consideration of discrepancy patterns across dyadic partners central to an understanding of relationship dynamics. This paper illustrates some avenues along which the development of such thinking may proceed.

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Table 1

Source of commensurability, relationship interpretation, and interpersonal feelings for initial relationship formation

Commensurability source	Individual's description of relationship	Individual's interpersonal feelings
Actual self	<i>This person is like me.</i>	reassurance, familiarity
Ought self	<i>This person is how I should be.</i>	approval
Ideal self	<i>I would like to be like this person.</i>	admiration

Table 2

Source of commensurability, relationship interpretation, and interpersonal feelings for stable relationships

Commensurability source	Individual's description of relationship	Individual's interpersonal feelings
Actual (own) : Actual (other)	<i>This person sees me as I really am.</i>	trust, intimacy
Ought selves of relational partners	<i>This person has the same standards as me.</i>	justification
Ideal selves of relational partners	<i>This person has the same ideals/aspirations as me.</i>	cooperation, alliance

Table 3

Relationship implications of discrepancy patterns within a dyad

<b>Congruent ideal self-guides</b>		
	<b>Congruent ought self-guides</b>	<b>Discrepant ought self-guides</b>
<b>Congruent actual selves</b>	Close, trust	Hierarchy dominant/submissive roles malignant cognitive exchange
<b>Discrepant actual selves</b>	Hierarchy, leadership/follower roles, cognitive exchange	Hierarchy, diminished intimacy
<b>Discrepant ideal self-guides</b>		
	<b>Congruent ought self-guides</b>	<b>Discrepant ought self-guides</b>
<b>Congruent actual selves</b>	diminished intimacy	superficial malignant exchange
<b>Discrepant actual selves</b>	judgmental	superficial, exchange

Footnotes

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- <sup>1</sup>According to SDT, self-discrepancies are not always related to emotional discomfort. The strength of the relationship varies according to the self-regulatory significance of the discrepancy (Higgins, 1996), which is influenced by a number of factors (see Boldero & Francis, 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> It must be stressed that in SDT the “other” perspective on the actual self or the self-guides involves the perceptions of the individual not the perceptions of the other.
- <sup>3</sup>For example, if I believe I am moderately intelligent (actual self) but my ideal self does not contain any reference to “intelligence”, then the possession of the intelligence, to what ever extent, has no significance at that point in time.
- <sup>4</sup> In this case, the attributes represent what is termed an antonymous mismatch by Higgins (1987).
- <sup>5</sup> We are indebted to a reviewer for some of the suggestions in this paragraph.
- <sup>6</sup> In making this claim, we acknowledge that, consistent with Baum and Andersen’s (1999) propositions, when we meet a new person how we respond to this other or the relational role they fulfill may be influenced by the representation of a current significant other of whom the new person reminds us. Such considerations are an important reason to consider triadic relations, discussed briefly below.
- <sup>7</sup> Even what counts as “actual” here is not a straightforward issue: for instance, both members of a dyad may have a fine understanding of their shared aspirations but could be equally deluded about their capacity, as a “team”, to achieve them. So correct perceptions (i.e. those that may be accurate within the dyad) can be

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associated with incorrect perceptions (i.e. those that relate the dyad to the external world.)

<sup>8</sup> In doing this, we do not mean to imply that the ought self-guide is any less important than the ideal self-guide. However, we acknowledge that for individuals with a predominant promotion or prevention self-regulatory focus, a self-discrepancy associated with the predominant focus (i.e., an AI self-discrepancy in the case of a predominant promotion focus) will have greater self-regulatory significance and, thus, this will have a greater impact on self-regulatory outcomes. In this case then, we would predict that relational discrepancies involving this self-guide would have a greater impact on emotions than discrepancies involving the other self-guide.

<sup>9</sup> There is a small body of literature – see, for instance, Snyder and Fromkin (1978) – that suggests the importance of a need for “uniqueness” in relationships, in which case it may be that close relationships optimally emerge under a moderate level of relational discrepancies. We, however, have based our argument at this point on the extensive work that emphasizes the importance of similarity, rather than uniqueness.

<sup>10</sup> Relationships in these “constrained” contexts are not what Thibaut and Kelley (1959) labeled non-voluntary relationships, since, we apply our terminology to a social environment, rather than to a particular relationship. Of course, there may be elements of both opportunity and constraint in all contexts, so that typically social environments provide a continuum from constrained to non-constrained, rather than a categorization.

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- <sup>11</sup> In fact, one of the motivations for organizational induction, training, and communication is to increase the salience of the commensurable aspects of the collective environment.
- <sup>12</sup> Constraint and competition may also be important considerations in relationships when an aspiration is directed to the social environment itself. For instance, to achieve an ideal of being extremely popular (e.g. perhaps winning an election) may require that other people's popularity be diminished. The social environment here may be constrained in the sense that there may only be a limited source of extreme popularity.
- <sup>13</sup> Respondents were explicitly surveyed about this assumption, which was well supported. Certainly, there were high levels of perceived commensurability and respondents had no difficulty in detailing five team aspirations and obligations, respectively.
- <sup>14</sup> An analysis involving "oughts" led to similar results.
- <sup>15</sup> Over 50% of the variance in anger was predicted in a regression with the following dependent variables: RDI, communal sharing, authority ranking (leader and follower) and interactions between RDI and the relational models variables.
- <sup>16</sup> The fact that "followers" perceived relationship in terms of hierarchy, and "leaders" moderated anger in terms of communal sharing, may arise because a team environment provides a formal leadership structure, so that "leaders" in a dyadic relation who are not formal team leaders may feel less comfortable in interpreting the relationship as hierarchical.