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A window to the true self: The importance of I-sharing in romantic relationships

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Abstract
This article examines the importance of I-sharing within romantic relationships. Results from four independent samples indicate that perceived frequency of I-sharing with one's romantic partner predicts relationship satisfaction and that this relationship is potentially mediated by perceptions that one's partner knows one's true self. These results fit with theories about increasing expectations on modern relationships to fulfill self-expression needs.

Keywords
I-sharing, psychology, relationship satisfaction, romantic relationships, self-knowledge, true self

"When I look at the color blue, how do I know that the color *I* see as blue is the same color that *other people* see as blue?" Although many of the questions born out of youthful curiosity can be answered, this one remains somewhat mysterious. We have no way of *knowing* that others experience reality the same way we do. Yalom (1980) refers to this as existential isolation and suggests it undermines our need for human connection. Luckily, a growing body of work on "I-sharing" (Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski,

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2004) outlines an aspect of human interaction that buffers existential isolation. I-sharing is the "sense that one's subjective experience overlaps with that of at least one other person" (e.g., laughing at the same joke; Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander & Pyszczynski, 2006, p. 243–244). I-sharing appears to serve both existential and prosocial functions (Huneke & Pinel, 2016; Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel, Long, & Huneke, 2015; Pinel et al., 2006) and may even be a powerful tool for improving intergroup relations (Pinel et al., 2015; Pinel et al., 2017).

Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski (2004) derived the term "I-sharing" from William James's distinction between "Me" (reflective self) and "I" (agentic/experiencing self). I-sharing is different from simply sharing an experience in that it hinges on a shared reaction—People can share an *objective* experience (e.g., hearing a joke) but fail to I-share if they have different *subjective* experiences of that event (e.g., laughing versus cringing). Pinel et al. argues that we are drawn toward I-sharers because they give us a sense of existential connection and a feeling of "kindred spirits" (Pinel et al., 2006, p. 244). Empirical work confirms that people prefer I-sharers to non-I-sharers (Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel et al., 2006) and that this effect is over and above any effects of objective similarity (Pinel & Long, 2012). The existing research has focused almost exclusively on the effects of I-sharing among strangers (which speaks to the robustness of its effects on interpersonal outcomes). However, it makes sense that I-sharing also matters in natural settings. Indeed, these fleeting connections likely serve as starting points for new relationships and as cues to the quality of existing relationships. The current research is the first to examine these possibilities. Specifically, we examine whether perceived frequency of I-sharing promotes relationship satisfaction in existing relationships.

While I-sharing should theoretically relate to satisfaction within a variety of close relationships, we investigate this issue specifically within romantic relationships. We suspected I-sharing might be particularly important to romantic relationships based on Finkel and colleagues' suffocation model of marriage. The suffocation model of marriage suggests that expectations surrounding romantic relationships have shifted over time to become increasingly orientated towards self-expression needs (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). Romantic relationships were once viewed as an outlet for meeting physiological (e.g., food and safety) or basic companionship needs but are now viewed as an outlet for meeting higher order psychological needs such as esteem and self-actualization (see Maslow, 1943). With these evolving requirements in a relationship partner, the importance of finding "the one" increases; we want partners who will be our best friend, help us discover ourselves, and with whom we share a passionate sexual relationship (Finkel et al., 2014).

We also chose to focus on romantic relationships, given that the existing research points to a number of predictors of relationship satisfaction that bear commonalities with I-sharing. For example, Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman (2002) found greater relationship satisfaction among married couples who believe that their partner is a "kindred spirit." Other related constructs that have been linked to relationship satisfaction are empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991) and emotional similarity (e.g., Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). Empathic accuracy occurs when another person accurately understands an individual's feelings. Understanding

a relationship partner's feelings indicates at the very least an understanding of a partner's subjective experiences, even if those experiences are not shared. Work on emotional similarity more directly suggests that the *sharing* of subjective experiences is important to relationship functioning. I-sharing, however, encompasses more than just empathy and shared emotional responses; it often involves perceptions of shared thoughts and motivations as well as feelings. I-sharing also hinges on the recognition of shared subjective experiences, unlike emotional similarity.

The current work builds on this existing research by examining a somewhat unique predictor of relationship satisfaction and by proposing a previously unexplored mediator in either the relationship or the I-sharing literature: the perception that one's partner knows your true self. The true self refers to one's beliefs about who they *really* are inside, regardless of how they behave in their everyday life (e.g., Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). Regardless of whether the true self is ontologically real (Baumeister, 1987), laypeople commonly believe that true selves exist (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012) and that it is important to know, follow, and express one's true self (Andersen & Williams, 1985; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013). The constructs of "I" and "true self" substantially overlap; both are experienced as highly internal and defined by thoughts more than behaviors (e.g., Anderson & Ross, 1984; Schlegel et al., 2012). Therefore, we suspected that when we perceive that our "I" connects with our partner's "I," we may feel that our partner is glimpsing our true self.

Thus, we predict that I-sharing experiences might lead us to believe that our partner knows our true self and that this, in turn, is positively linked to relationship quality. Although research has yet to explore this proposed pathway, there are several reasons to think this might be true. First, feeling like you have access to your partner's true self is predictive of increased relationship satisfaction (Wickham, 2013). This indirectly suggests that the opposite path, feeling like your partner knows *your* true self, may also predict increased satisfaction. Second, the feeling that your partner knows your true self could function as a form of self-verification (Swann & Read, 1981), which has been linked to relationship quality (Katz, Anderson, & Beach, 1997; Letzring & Noftle, 2010). Third, Kernis and Goldman (2006)'s model of authenticity posits that the belief that it is important for "close others to see the real you" (p. 302) is an important component of trait authenticity (they term this "relational orientation"). Individual differences in relational orientation positively correlate with relationship satisfaction, lending further credence to the hypothesized link between perceptions of partner self-knowledge and relationship satisfaction.

Current research

In order to test the hypothesis that I-sharing promotes relationship satisfaction via perceived partner knowledge of the true self, we conducted the same basic study with four different samples. The first three of these were originally designed as experimental studies to test the causal effect of I-sharing on relationship satisfaction using a metacognitive ease paradigm (i.e., availability heuristic; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Specifically, we asked participants to generate examples of I-sharing and attempted to make that task easy or difficult by manipulating the number of examples requested

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	Sample 1 ($N = 80$)	Sample 2 ($N = 145$)	Sample 3 ($N = 71$)	Sample 4 ($N = 278$)
Gender, *N*				
Women	58	84	52	219
Men	22	61	18[a]	59
Race/ethnicity, *N*				
American Indian/Alaskan	1	1	1	2
Asian	4	6	2	22
Indian	0	3	1	2
White	66	117	51	222
Black/African-American	2	6	12	2
Multiracial/other	7	11[a]	2[a]	25[a]
Hispanic/Latino, *N*				
Yes	19	22	3	78
No	61	121[a]	68	197[a]
Sexuality, *N*				
Straight	77	141	63	260
Gay	2	0	2	5
Bisexual/other	1	4	6	12[a]
Age (years), *M* (*SD*)	18.45 (0.92)	18.87 (0.94)	35.16 (12.18)	18.59 (1.11)
Relationship length (months), *M* (*SD*)	—	—	105.57 (97.52)	18.98 (15.61)

[a]Some participants did not respond to this item.

(e.g., Schlegel et al., 2011). However, these manipulations failed to reliably influence manipulation checks/dependent variables.[1] Thus, we collapsed across conditions and examined correlational relationships using one of the intended manipulation checks: participant's self-reported ease in generating examples. Although the manipulation failed, the logic that participants who found it easier to recall I-sharing experiences should perceive that those experiences happen more frequently applies. Sample 4 was explicitly collected as an individual differences study and also included a direct measure of I-sharing frequency.

Method

Participants

Eligibility requirements for each study stated that participants must currently have a romantic partner. Due to word limits, only basic details about each sample and the measures are provided here, more information (as well as full data sets) can be found on OSF (see https://osf.io/qgvhp/).

Samples 1 ($N = 80$), 2 ($N = 145$), and 4 ($N = 278$) were recruited from introductory psychology courses and compensated with participation credit. Sample 3 ($N = 71$) was recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and compensated with USD$0.50. Details regarding participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Our predictions for Sample 4 were preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/zx5j5.pdf.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for study variables.

	I-sharing frequency, *M* (*SD*)	True self, *M* (*SD*)	Actual self, *M* (*SD*)	Ideal self, *M* (*SD*)	Relationship satisfaction, *M* (*SD*)
Sample 1 ($N = 79$)	4.37 (1.61)	6.14 (1.08)	5.82 (1.68)	5.99 (1.07)	6.02 (1.13)
Sample 2 ($N = 143$)	4.81 (1.68)	5.82 (1.13)	4.91 (1.91)	5.69 (1.18)	7.47 (1.44)
Sample 3 ($N = 71$)	4.76 (2.04)	5.83 (1.27)	5.35 (1.88)	5.43 (1.33)	7.42 (1.86)
Sample 4a ($N = 277$)	5.69 (1.57)	6.21 (1.07)	5.95 (1.71)	5.96 (1.22)	6.22 (0.96)
Sample 4b ($N = 277$)	5.82 (0.92)	6.22 (1.10)	6.31 (0.97)	5.87 (1.24)	—

Note. 4a refers to analyses using I-sharing ease and single-item measures self-knowledge, and 4b refers to analyses using the multi-item measures of I-sharing frequency and self-knowledge. All items were measured on 7-point scales, except relationship satisfaction (Samples 2 and 3) which were rated on 9-point scales. *N*'s differ slightly from those reported in Table 1 due to exclusions; see OSF for details.

Measures

I-sharing ease. All participants were asked to generate examples of times "you and your partner shared the same subjective experience." They were given examples of laughing at the same joke and having the same reaction to a piece of music (Pinel et al., 2006). The number of examples and amount of detail requested from participants varied across samples/conditions (see OSF). Participants reported how easy it was to generate their examples with 2 items (e.g., "How easy was it to generate this list?" and "How difficult was it to generate this list?" (reverse-coded) The 2 items were highly correlated in each sample (all r'$s > .82$) and were averaged to form a composite (see Table 2).

I-sharing frequency. In Sample 4, we also included a direct measure of I-sharing frequency that consisted of 3 items ($a = .79$; e.g., "How often do you have moments where you and your partner feel the same way in response to something you experience together?").

Perceived partner knowledge. Participants responded to 1 item for perceived partner knowledge of three self-concepts (true, actual, and ideal). Participants were given a definition for each self-concept: true self ("who you really are"), actual self ("who you are in your everyday life"), and ideal self ("who you want to be"). After each definition, participants responded to the item, "How well does your partner know your true (actual, ideal) self?" Our hypotheses concerned the true self; we included the others for comparison purposes only (as is standard practice in true self research; e.g., Schlegel et al., 2013).

Given concerns about single-item measures (Loo, 2002), participants in Sample 4 also responded to an established 4-item measure of self-knowledge (Self Alienation subscale; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008) adapted for our purposes to be about each of the three selves and partner knowledge (all a's $> .86$).

Relationship functioning. Participants completed the full Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The Investment Model posits three determinants of relationship commitment/persistence: satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives. Of

Table 3. Correlations between perceived I-sharing frequency and partner self-knowledge variables.

	True self	Actual self	Ideal self
Sample 1	.32	.24	.19
Sample 2	.24	.30	.20
Sample 3	.47	.11	.43
Sample 4a	.25	.18	.24
Sample 4b	.48	.41	.31
Mrz	.37	.29	.28
Mr	.35	.28	.27
Combined Z	9.76***	7.36***	7.54***

Note. 4a refers to analyses using I-sharing ease and single-item measures self-knowledge, and 4b refers to analyses using the multi-item measures of I-sharing frequency and self-knowledge. *Mrz* = weighted mean correlation (Fisher's z transformed); *Mr* = weighted mean correlation (converted from *rz* to *r*).
***$p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 4. Correlations between predictors and relationship satisfaction.

	True self	Actual self	Ideal self	I-sharing frequency
Sample 1	.55	.37	.53	.44
Sample 2	.44	.18	.31	.28
Sample 3	.66	.21	.72	.39
Sample 4a	.51	.31	.42	.26
Sample 4b	.59	.56	.51	.53
Mrz	.61	.40	.51	.41
Mr	.54	.38	.47	.39
Combined *Z*	15.21***	9.70***	13.40***	10.60***

Note. 4a refers to analyses using I-sharing ease and single-item measures self-knowledge, and 4b refers to analyses using the multi-item measures of I-sharing frequency and self-knowledge. *Mrz* = weighted mean correlation (Fisher's z transformed); *Mr* = weighted mean correlation (converted from *rz* to *r*).
***$p < .001$, two-tailed.

these, relationship satisfaction is the most theoretically relevant because it is "influenced by the extent to which a partner fulfills the individual's most important needs" (p. 359). Thus, only analyses for the satisfaction subscale (all a's $> .89$) are presented here. Results for commitment as a more global indicator of adjustment are available in the online supplementary materials on OSF (along with results for exploratory measures developed by the authors which are available on OSF).

Results

Consistent with hypotheses, I-sharing frequency consistently correlated with relationship satisfaction and partner knowledge of one's true self (see Tables 3 and 4).

We conducted multiple mediation analyses in each sample[2] using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017; see Figure 1). The total effect of I-sharing on relationship satisfaction through partner knowledge of the three self-concepts was significant in each

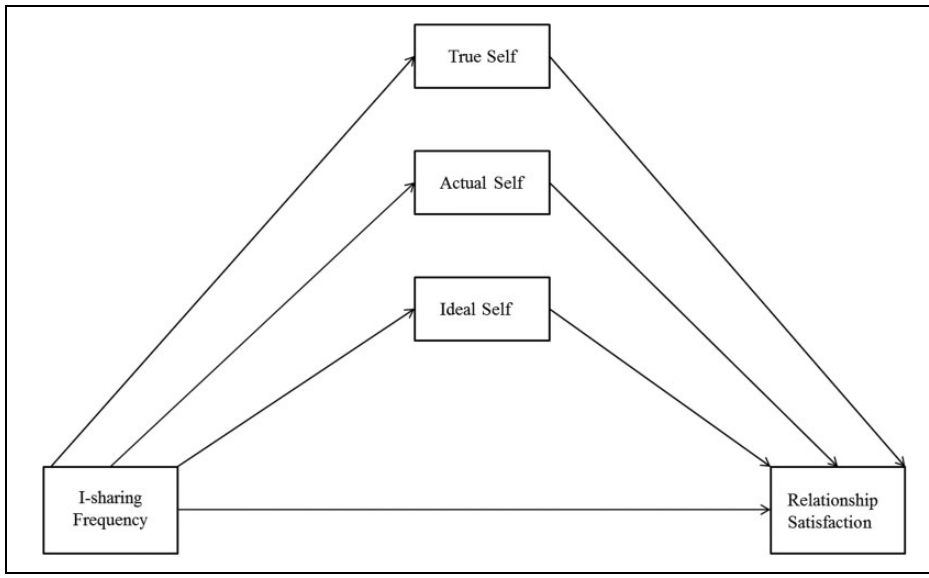

Figure 1. General mediational pattern.

sample (the mediation is significant if the confidence interval does not include zero; see Table 5). Examining each of the self-concepts individually, the results showed that partner knowledge of the true self was the most consistent mediator. The ideal self was a fairly consistent mediator, though it tended to have a somewhat weaker effect than the true self. The actual self was only a significant mediator in Sample 4.

We conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether the observed results were robust to relationship length (assessed in Samples 3 and 4; see online supplementary analyses on OSF). Both partial correlations and mediation models with the covariate added revealed that all the primary results remained significant after controlling for relationship length. We also explored whether relationship length moderated our mediational model using model 7 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). The results from Sample 4b suggested that I-sharing might be more consequential in relatively newer relationships (see online supplementary analyses on OSF). However, we are reticent to draw any strong conclusion about this, given that the relationship length was not a significant moderator in Sample 3 or 4a.

Discussion

Across four independent samples, we found support for our hypotheses that I-sharing positively correlates with relationship satisfaction and that perceived partner knowledge of one's true self mediates this relationship. The same patterns were observed using different operationalizations of I-sharing frequency (i.e., direct and indirect) and partner knowledge of true self (i.e., single-item and previously validated scales). The ideal self also emerged as a significant mediator across most samples. Although we did not initially predict that the ideal self would be a mediator, this is consistent with the existing

Table 5. Mediation results.

			Bootstrapping – BCa 95% confidence interval	
	Point estimate	*SE*	Lower	Upper
True self				
Sample 1	.08	.04	.01	.18
Sample 2	.07	.03	.03	.15
Sample 3	.11	.05	.02	.24
Sample 4a	.05	.02	.02	.11
Sample 4b	.10	.05	.01	.20
Pooled data[a]	.07	.02	.04	.11
Actual self				
Sample 1	.01	.02	−.02	.06
Sample 2	−.003	.02	−.05	.04
Sample 3	.01	.02	−.01	.08
Sample 4a	.01	.02	.002	.04
Sample 4b	.08	.04	.02	.17
Pooled data	−.00	.01	−.01	.01
Ideal self				
Sample 1	.05	.04	−.0028	.15
Sample 2	.02	.02	.0003	.08
Sample 3	.19	.08	.07	.39
Sample 4a	.03	.03	.01	.06
Sample 4b	.07	.02	.03	.12
Pooled data	.03	.01	.01	.06
Total				
Sample 1	.14	.06	.03	.27
Sample 2	.09	.04	.03	.19
Sample 3	.32	.10	.15	.55
Sample 4a	.10	.05	.05	.15
Sample 4b	.25	.05	.15	.37
Pooled data	.09	.03	.03	.15

Note. 4a refers to analyses using I-sharing ease and single-item measures self-knowledge, and 4b refers to analyses using the multi-item measures of I-sharing frequency and self-knowledge. BCa: bias corrected and accelerated; 5,000 bootstraps.

[a]Pooled analyses only include the common measures used across Samples 1–4.

research on the role of ideal selves in relationships (e.g., the Michelangelo phenomenon; Drigotas, 2002). By comparison, perceived partner knowledge of one's actual self only emerged as a significant mediator in one sample.

There are several ways future research can build on the current findings to deepen our understanding of I-sharing. First, the correlational nature of our analyses makes it impossible to definitely determine the direction of causality (e.g., it is equally plausible that relationship satisfaction causes I-sharing as it is that I-sharing causes relationship satisfaction). Future research should seek to successfully manipulate I-sharing with a romantic partner. For example, an in-lab interaction would likely be a stronger manipulation than our recall task. Daily diary or experience sampling methods could also be used to establish temporal precedence. Second, future research could explore other

potential mechanisms that underlie the downstream consequences of I-sharing. For example, I-sharing promotes prosocial behaviors (e.g., selflessness and cooperation; Huneke & Pinel, 2016; Pinel et al., 2015). This suggests I-sharing might lead to putting your partner's needs before your own and more cooperative behavior, which could, in turn, influence relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, the current research marks the first investigation of the importance of I-sharing within existing relationships. We chose the romantic relationship context as we suspected that sharing subjective experiences might be a particularly meaningful way that we foster connection and satisfaction with our romantic partners. However, we would likely expect similar effects of I-sharing in other types of close relationships (e.g., family members and friends)—it stands to reason that if sharing a subjective experience with a stranger increases liking (Pinel et al., 2006), and sharing subjective experiences with a romantic partner relates to relationship satisfaction (the current research), that sharing such an experience with another kind of close other might also confer relational benefits. This is of course speculation; future research should thus examine these effects across other kinds of relationships for a deeper understanding of the benefits of I-sharing.

While feelings of existential isolation are threatening to the basic human need for connection (Yalom, 1980), human beings are incredibly adept at managing existential concerns (Heintzelman & King, 2014), and I-sharing is one way people resolve feelings of existential isolation (Pinel et al., 2004). I-sharing can bolster perceptions that the one we love knows who we truly are. In a time when relationships are imbued with heavy expectations (Finkel et al., 2014), it is important to understand ways in which we connect with our loved ones to achieve satisfying outcomes. Perhaps a key to building more satisfying relationships is paying attention to the moments when we feel our partner is in touch with who we really are.

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Notes

1. Sample 3 also included an isolation condition that was dropped for consistency/comparability across samples. For further details, see https://osf.io/qgvhp/
2. We also ran this analysis on the pooled samples, in order to get a rough estimate of the meta-analytic effect.

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