Rusbult’s Investment Model and the Expansion of the Self-Expansion Model

From the outset, our development of the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986) was to a substantial extent explicitly in the larger context of Kelley and Thibaut’s (1978) interdependence theory. We saw self-expansion, especially when it occurs through including the other in the self in a close relationship, as a major source of positive outcomes when considering one’s comparison level and comparison level of the alternative. With the development of Caryl Rusbult’s enormously influential investment model (first described in Rusbult, 1980; for results of a recent meta-analysis, see Figure 1), the role of interdependence ideas became more precise and more valuable in shaping the development of our own theoretical and empirical work.

Sometimes this shaping resulted from needing to make more careful distinctions. One example is the distinction between the interdependence ideas of transformation of motivation and the self-expansion idea of including other in the self as they apply to mixed-motive situations. On the one hand, seminal studies such as Yovetich and Rusbult (1994) suggest that the primary “gut” reaction to an interdependence dilemma (conflicting desires of self and partner) is selfish and that only with time for reflection does it get transformed to a desire to maximize joint outcomes. Our view, on the other hand, was that close others are included in the self so that to some extent one’s immediate response to a conflict of this kind considers partner’s outcomes just as one’s own (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991, Study 1). Having been faced with this seeming contradiction, our eventual thinking (e.g., Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004) was that both operate but under different conditions. That is, in a close relationship the other is never identical to self but only included to some extent. Thus, we argue, to the extent the other is included in self (especially in circumstances that make the overlap of selves salient), the immediate response gives equal weight to partner and self. However, to the extent the other is not included in the self (especially in circumstances that make the lack of overlap salient), there will be an immediate self-oriented feeling. In this latter circumstance, following Rusbult, if there is sufficient commitment to the relationship, with a bit of extra time one will suppress the selfish response and transform the motivation for the benefit of the relationship. These ideas actually got worked out initially in an intense debate between Caryl and Art that took place during the question-and-answer period in a symposium at a major social psychology conference.

Another example of the generative process of clarification from subtle differences is an ongoing collaborative project that began when one of our then graduate students, Bianca Acevedo, spent a summer in Caryl’s laboratory in Amsterdam (and in which Madoka Kumashiro, then a postdoc working with Caryl, has played a major role). Here the goal has been to apply two related ideas to understanding the possible positive effects on
Figure 1. Rusbult’s basic interdependence model, including meta-analytic effect sizes and significances all entirely consistent with the model (Le & Agnew, 2003).

Note. Not included in this figure are several other significant aspects of the model that Rusbult developed over the years—particularly influential have been the identification (and empirical demonstration) of mediators of the effect of commitment on stay/leave outcomes by a series of behavioral and cognitive maintenance mechanisms (figure is from Le & Agnew, 2003, p. 38).

relationships of moving to a new country. The two related ideas are (a) Rusbult’s Michelangelo effect (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999) in which relationships benefit when partners support one another’s movement toward their ideal selves and (b) our notion (e.g., Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000) that partners benefit from shared novelty and challenge and when each supports the other’s individual self-expansion. This project is still in progress (being led by Madoka and Bianca). Notably, the study was designed both to explore the real-world implications of the two related ideas and to do so in a way that also helps identify the similarities and differences (and strengths and weaknesses) of the fundamental theoretical principles. As such it is perhaps an example of a very Lewinian approach of using application to advance theory—perhaps not surprising given that the two theoretical models both stem from shared Lewinian intellectual ancestry (Rusbult via Kelley and Thibaut; Aron via Arrowood via Kelley and Festinger).

Of course, sometimes our work converged with Rusbult’s in ways that quite directly mutually supported the development of both models. For example, Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1998) argued, with elegant empirical support, that including other in the self, what they labeled “cognitive interdependence,” was a cognitive relationship maintenance mechanism. Agnew and colleagues (1998) created a direct link between the two models by virtue of the term they used; they also directly advanced work on understanding including other in the self, both by putting it in the context of other cognitive maintenance mechanisms and very concretely by developing one of the most practical implicit measures of how much the other is included in the self (number of plural first person pronouns when writing about one’s relationship).

The major direct influence of Rusbult’s model on our current work has been with regard to the role of the cognitive maintenance mechanism of derogation of alternatives, a process first demonstrated by Johnson and Rusbult (1989) and that has been shown in quite a few studies since. The key idea of our current work is based on her idea that when
one is highly committed to a relationship, one perceives potential alternative partners as less desirable. Specifically, our current work is explicitly testing the relative influence of relationship commitment versus relationship self-expansion in generating this effect, testing both whether self-expansion will also have such an effect and then, presuming it does, whether the causal paths are such that both self-expansion and commitment have independent effects or whether one mediates the effect of the other.

These are just a few examples of how Rusbult’s work has and will no doubt continue to affect our own, which in turn is just one example of how her genius has and will continue to enrich relationship science for many years to come.

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References