

## THE SELF-EXPANSION PROCESS AND QUALITY OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines whether people with different affective temperament (depressive, cyclothymic, hyperthymic, irritable, anxiety-cognitive, anxiety-somatic and mixed) differ in terms of perceived social support. The sample is a convenience one, uniform by gender, consisting of 200 people under the age of 35. The instruments used in the research are: the Serbian version of the TEMPS-A scale, which assesses five affective temperaments, and the Serbian version of the Social Support Scale of the Study of Medical Outcomes (MOS-SSS). The results show that the depressive temperament perceives social support to a lesser extent than the cyclothymic ( $p < .05$ ), hyperthymic ( $p < .01$ ), anxiety-cognitive ( $p < .05$ ) and mixed temperament ( $p < .05$ ). On the other hand, the hyperthymic temperament is more prone to perceiving social support than the cyclothymic ( $p < .05$ ) and anxiety-somatic temperaments are ( $p < .05$ ). The main conclusion of this research is that hyperthymic temperament, which is characterized by most desirable traits such as optimism, sociability, self-confidence and eloquence, perceives its social environment to be more supportive than other temperaments, which is a consequence of its characteristics and the adequate communication of its own needs.*

**Key words:** *affective temperament, perceived social support, social support dimensions.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, the married couple Aron (Aron & Aron 1986) introduced the concept of self-expansion into the psychology of close relationships. The Arons integrated their previous studies into a model called the Model of motivation and cognition in close relationships (Aron & Aron 1986) and based it on two ground principles. The first principle is called Self-expansion motivation and it implies looking for a way to express and explore

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one's own efficiency. It represents one of the basic human motives described in literature such as exploration, research, efficiency, self-improvement (Bandura 1977; Gekas 1989). An intimate relationship can be taken as one of the ways in which to satisfy the need for self-expansion, and besides that need there are also friendship, learning, a career, travel, religion, expression through art, depending on personal preferences (Aron & Aron 1996). The second ground principle on which the model is based, is the Inclusion of others in the self, implying feeling others' resources, perspectives, and identity as one's own. In other words, a person in an intimate relationship tries to include their partner in their own self (Aron, Lewandovski & Mashek 2013). The authors believe the stated principles should not be equated and that, despite being related, they greatly differ conceptually. Self-expansion motivation is expressed as the tendency to seek new resources and identities, while the inclusion of the other in the self refers to the incorporation of those aspects of another person in one's own self (Aron, Lewandovski & Mashek 2013).

### **1.1. Self-expansion motivation**

Seeking self-expansion is not considered to be a conscious motive, but behaviors, leading to the satisfaction of this motive, can be (Mikulincer & Goodman 2006). The emphasis is not on the motivation to really increase resources and include the identity of the other person, but on the motivation to gather resources that mitigate achieving those goals. It should be stressed that the model highly values the rewarding of self-expansion, especially when the reward comes promptly – this creates feelings of excitement and passion, which usually happens when a new intimate relationship is formed. On the other hand, the model also implies a quick withdrawal of self, when negative effects are aroused. That happens in situations of a sudden loss of perceived potential efficiency, e.g., sudden death of a partner (Carver & Scheier 1990). The concept of self-expansion looks at passionate love not as a specific emotion, but as a goal-orientated one. Hence, people seek intimate relationships to quickly expand the self, and they achieve that by including the other in their own self. The model suggests that romantic love is nothing else than the perceived opportunity for fast self-expansion (Mikulincer & Goodman 2006).

When considering the motivational principle of self-expansion, it is necessary to establish how it relates to the relevant theoretical approaches dealing with romantic intimate relationships. It is considered that self-expansion motivation originates from the classical models of motivation and growth, Western and Eastern philosophy, as well as from the theory of evolution (Aron & Aron 1986). Among the modern approaches applied in this paper there are two of the most influential theoretical frameworks – the interdependence theory and attachment theory.

Classic interdependence theory studies the manners in which we expect gains or losses and consequently adjust behaviour in intimate relationships. The feelings people have in intimate relationships depend on their perceptions of gains and losses. Gains or benefits refer to all those relationships concerning the satisfying of needs and desires of individuals (material and social reward), while the losses refer to everything persons do not manage to effectuate because they are in that relationship. Satisfaction with intimate relationships depends on the ratio of gains and losses, as well as on the level of expectations a person has from a relationship. On the other hand, the level of expectations depends on previous experiences in close relationships and explains why some persons with an equal ratio of gains and losses in a relationship experience different levels of satisfaction.

Authors consider that for a relationship to survive, satisfaction is not all it matters. The notion of dependence, referring to the expectations in an alternative relationship, is also important (Bradbury & Karney 2010). Should a person assess that he or she would have more gains and fewer losses in some alternative relationship, dependence on the current relationship starts to diminish. In newer literature on interdependence theory, the parallel with “the Michelangelo phenomenon” tends to recur (Rusbult, Finkel & Kumashiro 2009). This phenomenon looks at partnership as a process in which intimate partners influence or “sculpt” each other, and over time individuals develop towards what they consider their “ideal self”. The phenomenon is usually present among couples who report a high level of marital satisfaction (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, and Whitton 1999).

The second most influential theory, on which the motivational principle of the self-expansion model is based, is the attachment theory or affective attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). The basic idea of the affective attachment theory is the safe haven concept, which is related to self-expansion motivation. Internal working models that refer to the self and others can be understood as different solutions to the need for self-expansion, depending on the experience an individual has acquired with regard to the principal figures of affective attachment (Aron, Lewandovski & Mashek 2013). Thus, for instance, persons who belong to the secure pattern of affective attachment will be confident in the support they have during the self-expansion process, while persons belonging to the avoiding pattern, will not be able to count on intimate others during the self-expansion process. In this case, self-expansion can be continued by isolating the need for intimacy and a person can replace an intimate partner by non-intimate others. A person belonging to the preoccupied pattern of affective attachment sees the availability of a safe haven as provisional and can withdraw at any moment, hence, in this case self-expansion can continue as the effort to develop a safe haven and obtain the support of an intimate person, who will enable further self-expansion. The connection between the affective attachment pattern and the motivation for self-expansion was illustrated in the study on unreciprocated love (Aron, Aron, and Allen 1998).

## **1.2. Inclusion of the other in the self**

According to the self-expansion model, general motivation to expand the self leads to the wish to enter into and maintain a romantic relationship, as romantic relationships are a satisfying, useful, and human means for self-expansion. For most human beings, including the other into their own self is an important opportunity for self-expansion, primarily because of the complexity and richness of another person, and because of the importance of social relations (Mikulincer & Goodman 2006). Including other in the self implies an overlap of the cognitive construction of the other with the cognitive construction of the self (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston 1998). When we include the other in the self, we overtake the resources, perspectives, and identities of that person and share the outcomes. The other person informs us who we are, shapes the way in which we see the world, affects our perception of gains and losses. Other theories dealing with relationships agree with the basic conception of including the other in the self. For instance, in terms of interdependence theory, the concept overlaps with the notion of motivation transformation which refers to the idea of resisting selfish wishes and acting for the benefit of the other person, for the sake of long-term benefit of maintaining a relationship. Authors believe that acting for the benefit of the other in an

intimate relationship is present, as another person's outcomes, be they good or bad, are directly perceived as one's own (Aron, Aron, Tudor & Nelson 1991).

### **1.3. Quality of romantic relationships**

There are different ways to determine the quality of marital and romantic relationships, hence the quality of romantic relationships implies a subjective feeling of the partners' satisfaction, as well as mutual adaptation of the partners or the partner's assessment of the relationship quality (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović 2006). In this case, the quality of romantic relationships will be considered through the self-expansion model. The self-expansion process begins when the learning about one's partner begins, when the new partners begin to intensely discover each other and spend a lot of time together. As a result, self-expansion, associated with the feelings of pleasure and excitement, rapidly occurs (Aron, Aron & Norman 2001). Should the romantic relationship continue, shared participation in novel and arousing activities improves the quality of the relationship and satisfaction with it, as well as mediates boredom (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna & Heyman, 2000; Graham 2008; Tsapelas, Aron & Orbach 2009). If the self-expansion process halts, the partners become accustomed to each other and they can become less satisfied with the relationship quality (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach 2000).

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. The research problem**

The basic research problem was the exploration of the romantic relationship quality based on the self-expansion concept. The goal was to check the relations between self-expansion and the inclusion of others in the self, as the authors believe these concepts, although related, differ to a significant extent (Aron, Lewandowski & Mashek 2013). Few studies conducted so far confirm the link between self-expansion and romantic relationship quality (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach 2000; Graham, and Harf 2014). Also, there are numerous positive effects of including the other in the self, which can improve the quality of a romantic relationship. Partners who approach romantic relationships authentically, from personal values, will benefit more from closeness in intimate relationships than partners led by extrinsic factors (Weinstein 2016). An experiment testing the hypothesis on the active and passive support of a partner, as an opportunity for self-expansion, was performed. The respondents were given tasks that could have been self-expanding or stressful, and they received active or passive messages, allegedly from their partners. The results showed that persons who were in long-term intimate relationships and who received active support from the partner, had increased levels of satisfaction with the intimate relationship, unlike the persons who were in short-term relationships. This experiment represents one of the first pieces of evidence on the effects of a partner's support and self-expansion on satisfaction with relationships (Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, and Caprariello 2014). In this study, one of the goals was to check whether the quality of the relationship and self-expansion process change with the duration of the romantic relationship.

## 2.2. Sample and procedure

The sample is a convenience one and consists of 319 respondents (149 males and 170 females), with an average age of 27, of different levels of education. Most of the respondents, 118 (37%), are in a romantic relationship of between 1 and 5 years, followed by 102 (32%) respondents who are in a romantic relationship of up to a year, 43 (13.5%) respondents are in a relationship 5 to 10 years long, and, finally, 56 (17.6%) respondents are in a relationship of more than 10 years. The data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed on social networks. Prior to the filling in of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed the survey was anonymous and that the responses would be used exclusively for science and research purposes.

## 2.3. Research instruments

*The self-expansion questionnaire (SEQ, Lewandowski & Aron, 2002)* consists of 14 items on a 7-point Likert scale. The respondents assess how much they see their romantic relationship as an opportunity to expand the self. The statements are formulated through questions such as: “How much has knowing your partner made you a better person?; How much do you see your partner as a way to expand your own capabilities?; How much does your partner provide a source of exciting experiences?”. The reliability of the scale for the original sample is good and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is .87 and .89. The scale is one-dimensional and a higher score on the scale indicates a greater possibility of self-expansion in a romantic relationship. Likewise, persons achieving high scores on the scale state they are more satisfied with their romantic relationship and the extent of their commitment in it (Lewandowski & Aron 2002). In this survey, the reliability is expressed via Cronbach’s alpha coefficient and it amounts to .92.

*Inclusion of others in the self (IOS scale, Aron, Aron & Smollan 1992)* is an instrument containing one single item, i.e. consisting of a drawing showing 7 pairs of overlapping circles, representing relationships between him/herself and their partner. The pairs of circles are ranked from no overlap, to pairs which overlap almost fully. Regardless of having only one item, the scale has a very strong predicative, convergent and constructive validity and is applicable in various cultures (Dalsky, Gohm, Noguchi & Shiomura 2008; Gächter, Starmer & Tufano 2015). One of the basic advantages of this scale is direct metaphor, going beyond potential language problems. Another advantage is that the scale is brief and convenient for use in pen-and-paper tests, as well as in *online* questionnaires (Hodges, Sharp, Gibson & Tipsord 2013; Le, Moss & Mashek 2007).

*The Relationship assessment scale (RAS)* was made as the result of the need for the development of a brief and reliable measure of satisfaction, which can be applicable to different types of close relationships. Scale reliability is high, .91 (Šunjić i Penezić 2014). It consists of seven questions referring to several aspects of the relationship, and the item content encompasses indicators of how much a partner meets one’s expectations, then general satisfaction with the relationship, an assessment as to how much a romantic relationship satisfies initial expectations, comparison with relationships of other people, love for one’s partner, and the estimate of the quantity of potential problems in the relationship. On this Likert-type scale, the respondent circles the answer which best describes his current intimate relationship. On the sample used in this survey, scale reliability is .85.

## 3. RESULTS

In the interpretation of normal distribution, the guidelines of the authors have been followed suggesting that the values of skewness and kurtosis, that is, of asymmetry and flatness, should be  $\pm 2$  (Gravetter & Wallnau 2014; George & Mallery 2010). In Table 1, the values of skewness and kurtosis are within the stated range of values in all the dimensions. The Table shows that *self-expansion* ( $M=5.38$ ), *inclusion of the other in the self* ( $M=4.87$ ), and *relationship quality* ( $M=4.22$ ) are highly expressed, which means that in the current sample, in romantic relationships, partners always get a high degree of self-expansion, inclusion of the other in the self and assess their relationships as quality ones.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

Variables	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Sk	Ku
Self-expansion	1	7	5.38	1.03	-.960	1.105
Inclusion of the other in the self	1	7	4.87	1.76	-.434	-.856
Relationship quality	1.57	5	4.22	.72	-1.280	1.491

By a single-factor analysis of variance we have explored the influence of the duration of an emotional relationship, to the extent of self-expansion in a romantic relationship. The respondents were divided into four groups according to the duration of their emotional relationship. The first groups consisted of respondents whose emotional relationship was up to one-year long; the second group of respondents whose relationship lasted between one and five years; the third group of respondents whose relationship was between 5 and 10 years long; and the fourth group of respondents whose relationship was more than 10 years long. A significant difference was established between the groups concerning the extent of self-expansion ( $F=4.916$ ;  $p=.02$ ). Subsequent comparisons using Tukey's HSD test demonstrate that the median value of group 1 ( $M=5.53$ ;  $SD=.90$ ) is notably different from that of group 4 ( $M=4.92$ ;  $SD=1.37$ ). Likewise, group 2 differs greatly from group 4 ( $M= 5.46$ ;  $SD= .88$ ). Group 3 does not differ significantly from the other groups. The majority of those differences, expressed as eta squared, amount to .04, which shows the difference is small despite being statistically significant; hence the difference between the groups was not taken into account in further analyses.

For the testing of the association between the variables, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used. The results indicate a strong association between the tested variables. The association is positive, which means that with the increase in the extent of self-expansion and the inclusion of the other in the self, the relationship quality also increases. Likewise, there is a medium degree of correlation between self-expansion and the inclusion of the other in the self. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2** Pearson's correlation coefficient

	Relationship quality	Self-expansion
Self-expansion	.693	-
Inclusion of the other in the self	.584	.480

The quality of a romantic relationship as the criterion variable can be predicted based on the assumed model i.e., based on the extent of the self-expansion and the inclusion of

the other in the self ( $F=197.030$ ;  $p=.00$ ). The predictors explain 55% of the variance. The self-expansion scale contributed the most to the prediction of romantic relationship quality ( $\beta=.527$ ;  $p=.00$ ), while the scale of inclusion of the other in the self contributed less ( $\beta=.331$ ;  $p=.00$ ), but still notably. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3** Regression analysis

Relationship quality ( $R=.745$ ; $R^2=.555$ ; Adjusted $R=.552$ ; $F=197.030$ ; $df=2$ ; $p=.00$ )		
Predictors	$\beta$	p
Self-expansion	.527**	.00
Inclusion of the other in the self	.331**	.00

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Self-expansion is the concept the Arons introduced into the psychology of romantic relationships. They observed a close relationship as a possibility to satisfy the basic human motive for exploration and self-improvement (Aron & Aron 1986). The primary purpose of this research was to establish the predictive power of the concepts of self-expansion and the inclusion of the other in the self on the assessment of romantic relationship quality. The results have demonstrated that the self-expansion dimension is highly expressed for the current sample, which means the need for self-expansion is mostly satisfied in romantic relationships. The same conclusion applies to the inclusion of the other in the self and romantic relationship quality.

The tests looking for differences among different groups defined based on the duration of the romantic relationships of the respondents have primarily established there are differences among the groups, but a more detailed analysis has determined that the value of eta squared is low. Therefore, despite statistical significance, in reality there are no differences among the groups. Such findings are not in line with the expected findings, as the effects of relationship duration and self-expansion on the relationship quality assessment were established in other studies (Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, and Caprariello 2014).

High positive correlations were obtained between self-expansion and the assessment of romantic relationship quality, as was expected and confirmed in some studies (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna & Heyman 2000). Previously obtained results demonstrate that when persons are not able to satisfy their need for self-expansion through the relationship with their partner or the need for self-expansion is very high, they can seek self-expansion in alternative relationships (Tsapelas, Fisher & Aron 2011). At the beginning of an intimate relationship self-expansion quickly occurs, associated with the feelings of pleasure and excitement (Aron, Aron & Norman 2001). If the partnership continues, shared participation in new and challenging activities improves the quality of relationship and satisfaction with it, and it contains boredom (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna & Heyman 2000; Graham 2008; Tsapelas, Aron & Orbuch 2009). However, should the self-expansion process halt or decrease and the partners become accustomed to each other, they can become less satisfied with the relationship quality (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach 2000). One of the key behaviors is the paying of attention to alternatives, i.e., potential partners, in case of failure of the current relationship (Rusbult 1983). A person in a committed relationship should reduce their alternatives or pay less attention to them (Johnson &

Rusbult 1989; Miller 1997). Contrary to that, a person feeling a lack of self-expansion, should have higher motivation to seek alternative partners, which has been confirmed (Vanderdrift, Lewandovsky & Agnew 2011).

Likewise, there is a medium intensity of association between the extent of self-expansion and the inclusion of the other in the self. The obtained correlation is expected, since in romantic relationships partners tend to include their partner's characteristics in the self. The authors believe the motivation for self-expansion and the inclusion of the other in the self are associated, but different as concepts, which has been confirmed in this research (Aron, Lewandovski & Mashek 2013). However, there are questions of how to predict the inclusion of the other in the self and how the inclusion of the other in the self can be increased. Research results demonstrate it is possible to increase the quality of a romantic relationship by participating in various arousing activities and that frequent participation in such activities leads to higher inclusion of the other in the self. On the other hand, the feeling of boredom can undermine someone's ability and readiness to include the other in the self (Tsapelas, Aron & Orbuch 2009). The literature shows that self-discovery is a powerful mechanism for the process of inclusion of the other in the self, as well as for stimulating intimacy. It has been experimentally proven that the gradual escalation of mutual self-discovery with a stranger, during a brief experimental session, leads to greater inclusion of the other in the self (Aron, Melinat, Aron & Vallone 1997).

The results of the regression analysis demonstrate that the quality of a romantic relationship can be predicted based on self-expansion and inclusion of the other in the self. A greater predictive contribution is provided by the self-expansion scale, and smaller, but still significant contribution, by the scale of the inclusion of the other in the self. Consequently, the self-expansion process can be associated with "the Michelangelo phenomenon, where 'partners influence each other and develop in line with their own 'ideal self'" (Rusbult, Finkel & Kumashiro 2009). In the accounts of couples reporting a high level of marital satisfaction, the presence of this phenomenon has been observed (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, Whitton 1999). Likewise, the results obtained support the findings of a study examining couples where the female partner was diagnosed with a decreased sexual desire. When women with decreased sexual desire commence to experience a higher degree of self-expansion, their sexual desire increases, as well as their satisfaction with the intimate relationship (Raposo, O Rosen & Muis 2019).

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## PROCES SAMOPROŠIRENJA I KVALITET PARTNERSKIH ODNOSA

*Osnovni cilj ovog istraživanja bio je ispitivanje odnosa između procesa samoproširenja i kvaliteta partnerskih odnosa. Uzorak je prigodni i činilo ga je 319 učesnika oba pola, sa prosečnom starošću od 27 godina. Za proveru stepena samoproširenja primenjeni su Upitnik samoproširenja (Self-expansion questionnaire, SEQ, Lewandowski i Aron, 2002) i Uključivanje drugih u self (IOS scale, Inclusion others in self, Aron, Aron i Smollan 1992), dok je za proveru kvaliteta partnerskih odnosa upotrebljena Skala procene kvaliteta veze (Relationship Assessment Scale – RAS, Šunjić i Penezić, 2014). Rezultati pokazuju da postoji srednja do visoka korelacija između ispitivanih varijabli i da se kvalitet veze može predvideti na osnovu stepena samoproširenja i uključivanja drugih u self. Takođe, nisu pronađene razlike među učesnicima kada su ispitivani efekti dužine trajanja emotivne veze.*

*Ključne reči: Samoproširenje, partnerski odnosi, uključivanje drugih u self, kvalitet partnerske veze.*