

Self-Expansion Perceptions and Behaviors Uniquely Contribute to Relationship Quality Over Time

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Self-expansion refers to the process of broadening the self via engaging in novel activities, gaining new skills, and acquiring new perspectives and is proposed to be driven in large part by one's close relationships. Self-expansion experiences include perceptions of potential (i.e., beliefs about how self-expanding a relationship could be in the future), perceptions of current experiences (i.e., beliefs about how self-expanding a relationship is present), and enacted behaviors (i.e., engagement in novel, interesting activities). In two preregistered dyadic daily experience studies, we examined whether self-expansion potential is an antecedent to behavioral self-expansion and current perceptions, and how these distinct self-expansion components uniquely and synergistically predict relationship satisfaction and commitment daily and over time. Results revealed that self-expansion potential prospectively predicted both behavioral self-expansion and daily perceptions of current self-expansion. Self-expansion potential, current perceptions, and behaviors separately predicted greater relationship satisfaction and commitment daily. Self-expansion potential—but not behaviors or current perceptions—also positively predicted satisfaction and commitment 2 months later. Implications regarding the power of potential in relationships are discussed, including the need for future research to consider this important facet of self-expansion.

Keywords: self-expansion, satisfaction, commitment, intimate relationships, dyadic data

Positive relationships and family experiences, particularly those involving romantic partners, are essential aspects of living well. Intimate relationship processes are robustly linked to physical and psychological well-being throughout life (Robles et al., 2014; Stanton et al., 2020). It is therefore critical to understand the elements involved in promoting high-quality, fulfilling relationships over time. In response to this need, many researchers have argued for the importance of excitement and shared growth between partners (i.e., self-expansion).

The self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996; Aron et al., 2013, 2022) proposes that people can fulfill their intrinsic motivation to enhance their self-efficacy by engaging in novel, challenging, and exciting activities and incorporating others' perspectives and experiences into one's self-concept. Close relationships (especially romantic relationships) are key facilitators of self-expansion; as individuals establish new relationships, they get to know new others, are exposed to

different perspectives, and engage in novel activities. Self-expansion, in turn, aids in relationship maintenance (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019). Self-expansion is most typically reflected in engagement in self-expansion behaviors, cognitive beliefs about how self-expanding the relationship currently is, as well as beliefs about the potential for the relationship to offer future self-expansion opportunities (the latter is termed self-expansion potential, Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006, or forecasted self-expansion, Sprecher et al., 2015).

Self-expansion behaviors and current self-expansion perceptions have received substantial attention in the literature thus far. Shared self-expansion behaviors (e.g., watching a new movie or taking a spontaneous trip together) are important for sustaining and improving relationships (Aron et al., 2013). Engaging in novel and exciting activities with one's partner predicts higher relationship quality, positive affect, and sexual desire (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Coulter &

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The hypotheses, methods, and analytic plans of both studies were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (Study 1: <https://osf.io/2b68a>; Study 2: <https://osf.io/hxtma>), and this information as well as the materials,

data, and code are publicly available at <https://osf.io/8tm4a/>.

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Malouff, 2013; Graham & Harf, 2015; Muise et al., 2019). Similarly, much is known about the relationship outcomes associated with partners' beliefs about how self-expanding their relationship is *currently*. Current self-expansion perceptions have been linked to greater relationship quality, lower interest in alternative romantic partners, and fewer depression symptoms (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2020; McIntyre et al., 2023; VanderDrift et al., 2011). Thus, maintaining and capitalizing on opportunities for self-expansion is pertinent to sustaining long-term romantic relationships.

In contrast to self-expansion behaviors and current perceptions, empirical studies have largely neglected perceptions of how a romantic partner and relationship may be self-expanding in the *future*. Distinguishing perceptions of potential from current perceptions is important because people are motivated by both current and future rewards (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), and relationship expectations have important consequences for relationship quality (e.g., Joel et al., 2023; Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). For example, partners' forecasts of satisfaction in their relationships shape their later experiences of satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016). We suggest that self-expansion potential may similarly shape future self-expansion behaviors and cognitions. Our first goal in the current research was to examine whether self-expansion potential is an antecedent of current self-expansion perceptions and engaging in self-expansion behaviors day to day.

We believe that self-expansion potential is vital in relationships not only because it may precede engaging in novel, exciting activities with one's partner and current self-expansion beliefs, but also because it should exert unique effects on partners' relationship quality. However, the literature on self-expansion potential is nascent, with only a few published articles systematically investigating the construct at the time of writing. However, this initial evidence points to self-expansion potential's personal and relational benefits, with self-expansion potential being linked to lower susceptibility to infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006), greater early romantic attraction (Sprecher et al., 2015), and better perceived health via higher positive affect (Stanton et al., 2020). Thus, self-expansion potential may be a critical cognitive component and forecasting variable involved in long-term relationship maintenance. Our second goal in this work was to test the unique contributions of self-expansion potential, current self-expansion perceptions, and self-expanding behaviors to relationship quality over time.

Last, it is possible that self-expansion potential and behaviors might synergistically predict relationship quality. Perhaps relationship quality may be especially high for partners who report greater self-expansion potential and engage in more self-expanding activities from day to day (i.e., the salutary effect of self-expansion behaviors on relationship quality may be amplified by greater perceptions of self-expansion potential). On the other hand, perceiving potential that is later unmet could lead to disappointment that one's relationship is not living up to one's expectations, and thus potential would have different effects on relationship quality depending on levels of behavioral expansion. However, previous research has shown that holding optimistic beliefs about one's partner or relationship in the face of negative experiences is beneficial to one's relationship (Lemay, 2016; Schoebi et al., 2012). Believing that one's relationship will offer opportunities for self-expansion in the future, then, may preserve relationship quality on days when partners do not

engage in self-expanding activities. Our third goal was to explore these competing possibilities and discover whether self-expansion potential amplifies the benefits of high self-expansion behaviors or buffers the detriments of low self-expansion behaviors.

The Current Research

We tested the associations between self-expansion potential, current self-expansion perceptions, behavioral self-expansion, and relationship quality in two dyadic daily experience studies. Specifically, we investigated whether self-expansion potential prospectively predicted later day-to-day self-expansion behaviors (Studies 1 and 2) and current self-expansion perceptions (Study 2). We also tested the unique contributions of self-expansion potential and behaviors (Study 1) or all three forms of self-expansion (Study 2) to relationship satisfaction and commitment daily (Studies 1 and 2) and 2 months later (Study 2).¹ Last, we explored the possible amplifying versus buffering function of self-expansion potential on relationship quality over time (Studies 1 and 2). The hypotheses, methods, and analytic plans of both studies were preregistered on the Open Science Framework,² and this information as well as the materials, data, and code are publicly available at <https://osf.io/8tm4a/>.

Hypotheses

Just as previous research has linked greater forecasted satisfaction to enacting pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., Lemay et al., 2015), self-expansion potential should motivate partners to fulfill their expectations by engaging in novel activities together. Therefore, guided by prior studies of relationship forecasting (e.g., Baker et al., 2017), we hypothesized that people who believe their relationship will be self-expanding in the future would be more likely to engage in self-expanding behaviors day to day. Similarly, self-expansion potential should predict later perceptions of how self-expanding the relationship currently is. In the interest of transparency, we note that all analyses pertaining to current self-expansion cognitions were not included in our original preregistration or the first version of this article and thus are considered exploratory. Our original documentation focused solely on the facets of self-expansion that were measured in both studies (potential and behaviors), whereas current cognitions were measured only in Study 2. However, reviewers indicated that current cognitions are a critical component to understanding the unique contributions of potential, and we therefore reanalyzed the data to include current self-expansion cognitions in our models where possible (i.e., in Study 2).

¹ Satisfaction and commitment are positively correlated and can be combined into a single Relationship Quality Index along with other variables like trust, closeness, passion, and love (Fletcher et al., 2000). However, satisfaction and commitment are unique components of several influential theoretical models (e.g., the investment model; Rusbult et al., 1998) and are two of the most common outcome variables in relationship science. Thus, our preregistered analyses involve exploring the links between cognitive (future and present) self-expansion and behavioral self-expansion with satisfaction and commitment separately.

² The data for Studies 1 and 2 were used in separate research conducted by two of the current authors regarding whether self-expansion moderates the associations between attachment orientations and relationship quality. Due to having some overlapping variables, these two projects were analyzed in tandem, with simultaneous preregistration of the hypotheses to ensure recursive hypothesis testing did not occur. Study information for the attachment-related research can be found at <https://osf.io/3bpcj/>.

In light of previous findings linking perceived self-expansion potential to personal and relational benefits (e.g., Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006; Sprecher et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2020), we predicted that one's *own* (actor) and one's *partner's* (partner) self-expansion potential would uniquely, positively predict relationship satisfaction and commitment over time. Similarly, we expected to replicate previous studies such that both one's *own* (actor) and one's *partner's* (partner) self-expansion behaviors and current cognitions would positively predict relationship satisfaction and commitment over time.

Finally, we anticipated that one's *own* (actor) self-expansion potential and behaviors would interact with each other, with higher self-expansion potential being particularly beneficial for relationship quality on days when partners' behavioral self-expansion was low. When generating hypotheses, we also discussed the possibility that these effects may go in a different direction, with the beneficial effect of high self-expansion behaviors on relationship quality being amplified when perceptions of future self-expansion potential were also high. However, it is unlikely that the average couple can consistently maintain high levels of behavioral self-expansion on a day-to-day basis given the practical limitations of everyday life, and yet many do manage to be consistently satisfied with their relationships. Thus, we hypothesized that the perceived potential for self-expansion in the future would buffer relationship quality on days when behaviors were low (cf. Lemay, 2016; Schoebi et al., 2012). We also explored actor-partner interactions (e.g., whether one's *own* self-expansion potential might buffer one's *partner's* low self-expansion behaviors) but made no a priori predictions due to a lack of literature testing actor-partner interactions in this domain. The treatment of human subjects in this research was in accordance with established ethical guidelines, and appropriate institutional approval was obtained from Western University (Study 1) and the University of Edinburgh (Study 2). We report how we determined our sample sizes, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations (if any), and all measures in each study.

Study 1

Method

Participants

The original sample was 130 cohabiting, romantic couples, but 15 couples were excluded from analyses because one or both partners did not consent to participate ($N = 5$) or did not meet inclusion criteria ($N = 10$). The final sample comprised 115 male-female couples recruited via online advertisements, a participant email list, and flyers posted around the local community. This sample size is consistent with previous studies using similar methodologies (e.g., Hagemeyer et al., 2015) but includes more diary days (21 vs. 14 days), resulting in 4,339 data points. Participants were 19–64 years of age ($M_{\text{years}} = 30.78$, $SD_{\text{years}} = 8.99$), and the majority identified as White (73%; 16.5% Asian, 5.7% Hispanic or Latino, 2.2% Black or African American, 1.7% Native American or Aboriginal, 1.7% South Asian, 0.4% mixed race, 0.4% Arab) and heterosexual (88.7%; 10.4% bisexual, 0.4% fluid, 0.4% pansexual). Participants were in relationships lasting 5 months to 26 years ($M_{\text{years}} = 6.83$, $SD_{\text{years}} = 5.87$). Approximately 42% of participants were casually or exclusively dating their current partner, and 58% were common law, engaged, or married. A minority of participants had children (41.3%).

Measures and Procedure

Data were taken from a larger longitudinal study of heterosexual couples (see <https://osf.io/42npz/>). Participants were told they would be taking part in a study about daily relationship and sexual experiences. The study involved an initial 30-min survey (Phase 1) and a 21-day diary period (Phase 2). All phases were completed online. For Phase 1, couples provided informed consent and then completed a questionnaire battery that contained a self-expansion potential measure.

During Phase 2, participants were asked to complete a 10-min online survey each day for 21 consecutive days. Given the varied nature of interests in the larger study, participants completed a different subset of questionnaires on odd and even diary days. However, some measures—including measures of self-expansion behaviors, satisfaction, and commitment—were assessed every day. Unique and individual survey links were emailed to participants, and partners were asked to complete their survey separately and privately. Survey links were set to expire before the next survey link was sent to ensure that partners could not complete multiple surveys at once. The average number of daily surveys completed was high (range = 4–21, $M = 19.00$, $SD = 3.70$). After finishing Phase 2, participants were debriefed and compensated up to CAD\$35.00 each based on how many parts of the study they completed.

Phase 1 Measures.

Baseline Self-Expansion Potential. Participants completed Lewandowski and Ackerman's (2006) Self-Expansion Potential Scale, a five-item measure rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) that assesses the degree to which individuals believe their current partner and relationship will offer them opportunities for personal growth in the future (e.g., "I feel that if this relationship with my partner were to continue I would be able to gain more insights, experiences, and/or knowledge from my partner"). Scores were calculated by averaging responses across items, with higher scores indicating greater self-expansion potential.

Phase 2 Measures.

Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors. Participants completed a checklist measure of five self-expansion behaviors adapted from prior research (Harasymchuk & Fehr, 2010) and selected the behaviors they had engaged in with their partner that day (e.g., "Tried new things with your partner"). Scores were calculated by summing across items, with higher scores indicating greater daily behavioral self-expansion. We note that this checklist does not capture all of the possible specific behaviors that could be considered self-expanding, as these vary from person to person, but rather attempt to capture a variety of possible experiences through more broadly worded items (e.g., going out, trying new things, doing something spontaneous, finding common interests).

Daily Satisfaction and Commitment. Participants reported their satisfaction using four items from the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all/extremely poor*, 5 = *a great deal/extremely good*; e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Participants reported their commitment using three items from the Commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult et al., 1998) rated on a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely*; e.g., "I feel very attached to our relationship"). In both cases, instructions specified participants should respond to each statement in terms of how well it characterized their relationship that day. Scores were

calculated by averaging across the relevant items, with higher scores indicating greater daily satisfaction and commitment, respectively.

Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics, reliability information, and correlations among study variables. Our data analytic approach was guided by the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM), which allowed us to test both actor and partner effects while statistically accounting for the mutual influence existing between relationship partners. We tested models using multilevel modeling, nesting partners' scores within a group of $N = 2$ as per Kenny et al.'s (2006) suggestions regarding the use of multilevel modeling with indistinguishable dyadic data. All predictors were standardized to allow ease of interpretation of the effects and to provide estimates of effect size. All predictors were fixed, and slopes were allowed to vary randomly. Although not originally preregistered, at the recommendation of reviewers, all models predicting relationship satisfaction and commitment controlled for individuals' Phase 1 scores on the relevant outcome.³ Results without controlling for baseline scores can be found in our additional online materials on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/by72n>).

We first ran an over-time APIM with actor and partner baseline self-expansion potential predicting self-expansion behaviors over the next 21 days. We then used a two-step process to conduct moderated over-time APIMs, with separate models for daily satisfaction and commitment as outcome variables. In the first step, the main effects of actor and partner baseline self-expansion potential and actor and partner daily self-expansion behaviors were entered as simultaneous predictors. In the second step, we added the interaction terms, with actor and partner daily self-expansion behaviors predicting satisfaction and commitment, moderated by actor and partner baseline self-expansion potential. Following the guidelines of Garcia et al. (2015), two separate moderator variables were included, one for the actor and one for the partner. Additionally, four two-way interaction terms were added: the interaction of the actor's self-expansion behaviors and each of the moderators, and the interaction of the partner's self-expansion behaviors with each of the moderators, which evaluate the four different moderator effects.⁴

Associations Between Self-Expansion Potential and Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors

Consistent with hypotheses, individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential enacted more self-expansion behaviors over the next 21 days, $\beta(SE) = .15 (.05)$, 95% CI [.06, .25], $p = .001$. Moreover, individuals whose partners reported higher self-expansion potential enacted more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .15 (.05)$, 95% CI [.06, .24], $p = .002$.

Associations Between Self-Expansion Experiences and Daily Satisfaction and Commitment

As seen in Table 2 and consistent with hypotheses, daily relationship satisfaction and commitment were higher when individuals reported higher baseline self-expansion potential or daily behaviors, or when their partners reported higher baseline potential. Effects were stronger for self-expansion potential than self-expansion behaviors. Contrary to prior research, partners' self-expansion

behaviors negatively predicted actor's daily satisfaction and did not significantly predict their daily commitment.

We also found preliminary evidence for a buffering effect of self-expansion potential. One interaction emerged for satisfaction and four interactions emerged for commitment (see Table 2 for the overall interaction statistics, with simple slope statistics for significant interactions presented in the following paragraphs). Although the predicted Actor \times Actor interaction did not emerge for satisfaction, a significant Actor \times Partner interaction emerged. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential whose partner reported more daily behavioral self-expansion were more satisfied day to day, $\beta(SE) = .13 (.02)$, 95% CI [.08, .18], $p < .001$. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential whose partner reported less daily behavioral self-expansion also reported higher daily satisfaction, $\beta(SE) = .19 (.02)$, 95% CI [.15, .24], $p < .001$. The slope was steeper for those whose partner reported less behavioral self-expansion, suggesting a buffering effect of potential.

A significant Actor \times Actor interaction emerged for commitment. Individuals reporting more daily self-expansion behaviors and higher self-expansion potential were more committed day to day, $\beta(SE) = .25 (.03)$, 95% CI [.19, .31], $p < .001$. Individuals reporting fewer daily self-expansion behaviors but higher self-expansion potential also reported higher commitment, $\beta(SE) = .30 (.03)$, 95% CI [.24, .36], $p < .001$. The slope was steeper for those engaging in fewer self-expansion behaviors, suggesting a buffering effect of potential.

A significant Actor \times Partner interaction emerged for commitment. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential whose partner reported more daily self-expansion behaviors were more committed day to day, $\beta(SE) = .22 (.03)$, 95% CI [.15, .28], $p < .001$. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential whose partner reported fewer self-expansion behaviors also reported higher commitment, $\beta(SE) = .33 (.03)$, 95% CI [.27, .39], $p < .001$. The slope was steeper for those whose partner reported fewer self-expansion behaviors, suggesting a buffering effect of potential.

A significant Partner \times Actor interaction emerged for commitment. Individuals reporting greater daily self-expansion behaviors felt equivalently committed day to day regardless of their partner's self-expansion potential, $\beta(SE) = -.01 (.03)$, 95% C [-.07, .04], $p = .618$. However, individuals reporting fewer self-expansion behaviors whose partner perceived higher self-expansion potential reported

³ Based on reviewer request, we also ran models controlling for the prior day's outcome (rather than baseline scores). Controlling for the previous day's outcome score requires that participants not only completed the diary on a given day but also on the previous day. Given that not all participants completed all diary days, this approach results in data loss (vs. controlling for baseline scores which were completed by all participants, thus using all days that the participant completed measures for). Therefore, the results of these additional models are presented in our additional online materials at <https://osf.io/by72n>.

⁴ Based on reviewer request, we also ran separate models controlling for relationship length (raw score and log-transformed, with separate models for each), age, and gender. There were only two differences in the significance levels of the effects of interest for both Studies 1 and 2 (the main effect of partners' self-expansion behaviors on relationship satisfaction in Step 2 of Study 1 and the main effect of partners' self-expansion potential on relationship satisfaction in Step 2 of Study 2). Reviewers also requested models with interactions between the effects of interest and relationship length (raw score and log-transformed). Although some of these interactions were significant in Study 1, none of them replicated in Study 2. Details of these analyses are included in our additional online materials at <https://osf.io/by72n>.

Table 1
Study 1: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Information, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	Descriptives and reliability			Correlations					
	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α or <i>Rc</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Phase 1 satisfaction	2.14–5.57	8.33 (1.15)	.86	.52***	.71***	.75***	.15***	.72***	.59***
2. Phase 1 commitment	2.00–9.00	4.77 (.67)	.93		.37***	.68***	.15***	.61***	.65***
3. Self-expansion potential	1.20–7.00	5.99 (1.08)	.87			.26***	.15***	.60***	.56***
4. Daily expansion behaviors	0.00–5.00	1.62 (1.49)	N/A				.47***	.22**	.19***
5. Daily satisfaction	1.00–5.00	4.42 (0.71)	.80					.52***	.76***
6. Daily commitment	1.00–7.00	6.48 (0.95)	.90						.40***

Note. *N* = 115 romantic couples. Higher scores on continuous variables represent greater standing on the variable (e.g., greater self-expansion potential). We present actor correlations, with actor–partner correlations (e.g., actor self-expansion potential and partner self-expansion potential) appearing in boldface along the diagonal. N/A = not applicable.

*** *p* < .001.

higher commitment, $\beta(SE) = .14 (.03)$, 95% CI [.09, .19], *p* < .001, providing evidence for a buffering effect of potential.

Finally, a significant Partner \times Partner interaction emerged for commitment. Individuals whose partner reported more daily self-expansion behaviors and perceived higher self-expansion potential reported higher commitment, $\beta(SE) = .16 (.03)$, 95% CI [.11, .22], *p* < .001. Individuals whose partner reported fewer daily self-expansion behaviors felt equivalently committed day to day regardless of their self-expansion potential, $\beta(SE) = -.03 (.03)$, 95% CI [–.09, .02], *p* = .205. This interaction opposes a buffering effect.

Study 2

In Study 1, we found evidence that perceived future self-expansion potential predicted later daily engagement in self-expansion behaviors, and both potential and behaviors independently predicted relationship satisfaction and commitment over 21 days. We also found preliminary

evidence that self-expansion potential protected satisfaction and commitment when daily self-expanding behaviors were low. The goal of Study 2 was to replicate and extend these findings in another dyadic daily experience study. In Study 2, we also measured current self-expansion cognitions and included a follow-up survey 2 months after the diary to examine lasting effects.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 100 romantic couples (87 men–women dyads, eight women–women dyads, two women–trans men dyads, two women–nonbinary/genderqueer dyads, and one men–men dyad) recruited from the local community via social media posts, magazine advertisements, and flyers distributed at wedding fairs. This sample size was based on an a priori APIMPowerR analysis suggesting that 100 couples would provide 84% power for small-to-medium

Table 2
Study 1: Main and Interactive Associations Among Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Potential and Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Behaviors Predicting Daily Satisfaction and Commitment

Predictor	Daily satisfaction		Daily commitment	
	β (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	β (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI
Step 1				
Intercept	4.43 (.03)***	[4.37, 4.49]	6.49 (.03)***	[6.42, 6.55]
A expansion potential	.17 (.02)***	[.13, .21]	.29 (.03)***	[.24, .34]
P expansion potential	.04 (.02)*	[.01, .08]	.07 (.02)**	[.02, .12]
A expansion behaviors	.07 (.01)***	[.05, .08]	.07 (.01)***	[.05, .09]
P expansion behaviors	–.02 (.01)*	[–.03, –.003]	–.01 (.01)	[–.03, .01]
Phase 1 outcome	.32 (.02)***	[.29, .35]	.32 (.02)***	[.28, .36]
Step 2				
Intercept	4.43 (.03)***	[4.38, 4.49]	6.49 (.03)***	[6.43, 6.56]
A expansion potential	.16 (.02)***	[.12, .21]	.27 (.03)***	[.22, .33]
P expansion potential	.04 (.02)*	[.004, .08]	.06 (.02)**	[.02, .11]
A expansion behaviors	.06 (.01)***	[.05, .08]	.08 (.01)***	[.05, .10]
P expansion behaviors	–.02 (.01)*	[–.03, –.001]	–.01 (.01)	[–.04, .01]
A Potential \times A Behaviors	.004 (.01)	[–.01, .02]	–.03 (.01)*	[–.06, –.001]
A Potential \times P Behaviors	–.03 (.01)***	[–.05, –.01]	–.06 (.01)***	[–.09, –.03]
P Potential \times A Behaviors	–.01 (.01)	[–.02, .01]	–.08 (.01)***	[–.11, –.05]
P Potential \times P Behaviors	.01 (.01)	[–.01, .02]	.10 (.01)***	[.07, .12]
Phase 1 outcome	.32 (.02)***	[.28, .35]	.32 (.02)***	[.28, .36]

Note. *N* = 115 romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner; CI = confidence interval; *SE* = standard error.

* *p* < .05. ** *p* \leq .01. *** *p* \leq .001.

cross-sectional effects. Participants were 18–64 years of age ($M_{\text{years}} = 24.15$ years, $SD_{\text{years}} = 6.61$) and were in relationships lasting 3 months to 35.50 years ($M_{\text{years}} = 2.84$ years, $SD_{\text{years}} = 4.41$). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual/straight (80%), followed by bisexual/pansexual (12.5%), lesbian (5%), queer (1.5%), gay (0.5%), or “other” (0.5%). Most participants identified as White (85.5%), followed by Hispanic (3%), mixed/multiple ethnic groups (3%), South Asian (2.5%), Southeast Asian (2.5%), “other” (2%), and East Asian (1.5%). Regarding education, 35.5% of the sample had obtained an undergraduate degree or more. Participants reported household annual income ranging from £0 to 12,500 (31%), £12,501 to 14,549 (6.5%), £14,550 to 24,944 (12%), £24,945 to 43,430 (22.5%), £43,431 to 150,000 (23.5%), or £150,000+ (4%).⁵ A large portion of the sample was currently students (70.5%). Approximately 85.5% of participants were casually or exclusively dating their current partner, and 14.5% were common law, engaged, in a civil partnership, or married. A minority of participants were cohabiting at baseline (38%) and had kids (7%). Ninety-eight couples were still together at the 2-month follow-up.

Measures and Procedure

Data were taken from a larger longitudinal study of romantic couples (see <https://osf.io/ekv6x/>). Participants were told they were taking part in a study about relationship experiences over time. The study involved an initial 2-hr lab session (Phase 1), a 14-day diary period (Phase 2), and a follow-up survey 2 months later (Phase 3). For Phase 1, couples attended a joint lab session, provided informed consent, and then completed several tasks including a questionnaire battery that contained self-expansion potential, satisfaction, and commitment measures.

During Phase 2, participants were asked to complete a 15-min online survey each day for 14 consecutive days, which included measures of self-expansion behaviors, satisfaction, and commitment. Unique survey links were emailed to participants at 4:00 p.m. each day, and partners were asked to complete their survey separately and privately before 11:59 p.m. Survey links were individual and set to expire at midnight the following day to ensure that partners could not complete multiple surveys at once. The average number of daily surveys completed was high (range = 1–14, $M = 12.96$, $SD = 2.01$).

Phase 3 occurred 2 months after Phase 2. Participants were asked to complete a final 45-min online survey, which included satisfaction and commitment measures. The Phase 3 survey links were also individual. Participants had up to 1 week to complete the follow-up survey. After finishing Phase 3, participants were debriefed and compensated up to GBP£50.00 each based on how many parts of the study they completed.

Phase 1 Measures.

Baseline Self-Expansion Potential. Participants completed Lewandowski and Ackerman’s (2006) Self-Expansion Potential Scale. Scores were calculated the same way as in Study 1.

Baseline Satisfaction and Commitment. Participants completed the Satisfaction subscale of the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998), a five-item measure rated on a 9-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*) that assesses how content individuals are in their current relationship (e.g., “Our relationship makes me very happy”). Participants also completed the Commitment subscale of the IMS, a seven-item measure rated on a 9-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 9 = *completely agree*) that assesses how dedicated individuals are to

their current relationship (e.g., “I want our relationship to last for a very long time”). Scores were calculated by averaging responses across the subscale items, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction and commitment, respectively.

Phase 2 Measures.

Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors. Participants completed a checklist measure of six self-expansion behaviors adapted from Harasymchuk and Fehr (2010) and selected the behaviors they did with their partner that day (e.g., “Did something spontaneous with your partner”). Scores were calculated the same way as in Study 1.

Daily Self-Expansion Cognitions. Participants completed a three-item measure of current self-expansion cognitions adapted from the Self-Expansion Questionnaire (Lewandowski & Aron, 2002). Items assessed how much individuals felt their relationship helped them grow that day (e.g., “Today, I gained more insight, experiences, and/or knowledge from my partner”) and were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Scores were calculated by averaging responses across items, with higher scores indicating greater current daily self-expansion perceptions.

Daily Satisfaction and Commitment. Participants completed a one-item measure of daily satisfaction (i.e., “How satisfied are you with your relationship today?”) and a one-item measure of commitment (i.e., “How committed are you to your relationship today?”) adapted from the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), with higher scores indicating greater daily satisfaction and commitment, respectively.

Phase 3 Measures.

Follow-Up Satisfaction and Commitment. As in Phase 1, participants reported satisfaction and commitment using the relevant subscales of the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998).

Results

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics, reliability information, and correlations among study variables. Our data analytic strategy was identical to Study 1, with the addition of actor and partner current self-expansion cognitions to all models and two other moderated over-time APIMs with follow-up satisfaction and commitment as outcome variables. We again controlled for prior scores on the relevant outcome variable when predicting relationship satisfaction and commitment. Specifically, we controlled for the most recent measure of the outcome (Phase 1 score when predicting Phase 2 daily outcomes, mean Phase 2 score when predicting Phase 3 follow-up outcomes). Models not including our control variables can be found in our additional online materials on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/8tm4a/>). We again standardized continuous predictors for ease of interpretation and to provide estimates of effect size.

Associations Between Self-Expansion Potential and Daily Self-Expansion

Consistent with Study 1, individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential at Phase 1 reported more daily behavioral self-expansion in Phase 2, $\beta(SE) = .11 (.05)$, 95% CI [.01, .21], $p = .026$. Moreover, individuals whose partners reported higher self-expansion

⁵ Income bracket options were based on Scottish tax brackets at the time of data collection.

Table 3*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Information, and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variable	Descriptives and reliability			Correlations									
	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Phase 1 satisfaction	1.60–9.00	7.47 (1.18)	.87	.46***	.60***	.56***	.08***	.19***	.44***	.43***	.64***	.46***	.43***
2. Phase 1 commitment	2.86–9.00	7.76 (1.13)	.83		.48***	.56***	.06***	.13***	.38***	.45***	.56***	.75***	.54***
3. Phase 1 expansion potential	2.80–7.00	6.08 (0.91)	.86			.14***	.09***	.29***	.37***	.37***	.44***	.40***	.65***
4. Daily expansion behaviors	0.00–6.00	1.69 (1.44)	N/A				.50***	.41***	.24***	.20***	.16***	.11***	.15***
5. Daily expansion cognitions	1.00–7.00	4.71 (1.30)	.81					.37***	.39***	.33***	.17***	.10***	.27***
6. Daily satisfaction	1.00–7.00	6.22 (1.20)	N/A						.46***	.74***	.47***	.33***	.40***
7. Daily commitment	1.00–7.00	6.52 (0.99)	N/A							.42***	.49***	.39***	.42***
8. Follow-up satisfaction	1.00–9.00	7.47 (1.27)	.88								.11***	.63***	.61***
9. Follow-up commitment	3.71–9.00	7.85 (1.30)	.86									.43***	.58***
10. Follow-up expansion potential	2.00–7.00	6.03 (.92)	.85										.28***

Note. $N = 100$ romantic couples. Higher scores on continuous variables represent greater standing on the variable (e.g., greater self-expansion potential). We present actor correlations, with actor-partner correlations (e.g., actor self-expansion potential and partner self-expansion potential) appearing in boldface along the diagonal. N/A = not applicable.

*** $p < .001$.

potential enacted more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .16$ (.05), 95% CI [.06, .26], $p = .002$.

We also explored whether self-expansion potential at Phase 1 predicted current self-expansion cognitions at Phase 2. Results indicated that individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential later reported higher perceptions of current self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .35$ (.05), 95% CI [.25, .44], $p < .001$. Moreover, individuals whose partners reported higher self-expansion potential perceived higher daily self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .15$ (.05), 95% CI [.05, .25], $p = .003$.⁶

Associations Between Self-Expansion Experiences and Daily and Follow-Up Satisfaction and Commitment

As seen in Tables 4 (daily outcomes) and 5 (follow-up outcomes), replicating and extending Study 1, at the daily level actor's self-expansion potential, daily behaviors, and current cognitions were all uniquely and positively associated with their relationship satisfaction and commitment. When predicting relationship satisfaction and commitment 2 months later, of the actor effects, only self-expansion potential was consistently and positively associated with these outcomes. That is, actor's potential predicted higher follow-up relationship satisfaction and commitment, whereas actor's behavior predicted higher satisfaction only, and current cognitions were unexpectedly negatively associated with future commitment. For the partner effects, only self-expansion potential was significantly associated with higher daily relationship satisfaction and commitment and higher satisfaction 2 months later.

Two interactions emerged for daily satisfaction and one interaction emerged for daily commitment (see Table 4 for the overall interaction statistics, with simple slope statistics for significant interactions presented in the following paragraphs). A significant Actor \times Actor interaction emerged for daily satisfaction. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential were equally satisfied day to day when they reported more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .08$ (.05), 95% CI [–.02, .17], $p = .111$. However, when daily behavioral self-expansion was low, perceiving higher self-expansion potential was associated with higher relationship satisfaction, $\beta(SE) = .17$ (.05), 95% CI [.08, .27], $p < .001$, suggesting a buffering effect of potential. Although this interaction was not found

in Study 1, the direction of the effect is similar and is consistent with hypotheses.

Additionally, a significant Partner \times Actor interaction emerged for daily satisfaction. When their partner perceived higher self-expansion potential, individuals were equally satisfied day to day when they reported engaging in more behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .01$ (.05), 95% CI [–.08, .11], $p = .764$. However, when they engaged in less behavioral self-expansion, perceiving higher self-expansion potential was associated with higher relationship satisfaction, $\beta(SE) = .15$ (.04), 95% CI [.06, .23], $p = .001$, suggesting a buffering effect of potential. Although this interaction was not found in Study 1, the direction of the effect is similar.

Finally, replicating Study 1, a significant Partner \times Actor interaction emerged for daily commitment. When their partner perceived higher self-expansion potential, individuals were more committed day to day when they reported engaging in more behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .08$ (.04), 95% CI [.003, .16], $p = .042$, or less behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .20$ (.04), 95% CI [.13, .28], $p < .001$. The slope was steeper for those engaging in fewer self-expansion behaviors, suggesting a buffering effect of potential.

No interactions emerged predicting follow-up satisfaction or commitment, suggesting that any buffering effects of self-expansion potential may occur solely at the daily level.

General Discussion

Extending the self-expansion and the relationship forecasting literature, in two dyadic daily experience studies, we found that baseline self-expansion potential predicted later engagement in shared self-expanding activities and daily self-expansion cognitions. Across studies, actor and partner self-expansion potential and actor self-expansion behaviors uniquely predicted greater daily satisfaction

⁶ We also ran an exploratory mediation model where self-expansion potential at Phase 1 predicted daily self-expansion behaviors and cognitions, which in turn predicted Phase 3 self-expansion potential to understand whether there is a cyclical nature to self-expansion associations. Results revealed no evidence for mediation. Given the exploratory nature of these results and the lack of significant effects, we do not discuss these analyses further in this article and instead present these results in our additional online materials at <https://osf.io/rtd4b/>.

Table 4

Study 2: Main and Interactive Associations Among Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Potential and Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Behaviors Predicting Daily Satisfaction and Commitment

Predictor	Daily satisfaction		Daily commitment	
	β (SE)	95% CI	β (SE)	95% CI
Step 1				
Intercept	6.22 (.06)***	[6.10, 6.33]	6.51 (.05)***	[6.41, 6.61]
A expansion potential	.13 (.04)**	[.05, .22]	.10 (.04)*	[.02, .17]
P expansion potential	.10 (.04)*	[.01, .18]	.16 (.04)***	[.09, .23]
A expansion behaviors	.08 (.02)***	[.04, .12]	.03 (.02)*	[.0003, .07]
P expansion behaviors	.02 (.02)	[-.02, .07]	.02 (.02)	[-.02, .05]
A expansion cognitions	.33 (.02)***	[.28, .37]	.18 (.02)***	[.14, .21]
P expansion cognitions	.04 (.02)	[-.001, .08]	.02 (.02)	[-.01, .05]
A Phase 1 outcome	.34 (.03)***	[.28, .40]	.33 (.03)***	[.27, .39]
Step 2				
Intercept	6.23 (.06)***	[6.12, 6.34]	6.52 (.05)***	[6.43, 6.62]
A expansion potential	.12 (.04)**	[.04, .21]	.09 (.04)*	[.01, .16]
P expansion potential	.08 (.04)*	[.001, .16]	.14 (.04)***	[.07, .21]
A expansion behaviors	.09 (.02)***	[.05, .13]	.04 (.02)*	[.01, .07]
P expansion behaviors	.02 (.02)	[-.02, .06]	.02 (.02)	[-.02, .05]
A expansion cognitions	.32 (.02)***	[.28, .37]	.17 (.02)***	[.14, .21]
P expansion cognitions	.04 (.02)	[-.003, .08]	.02 (.02)	[-.01, .05]
A Potential \times A Behaviors	-.05 (.02)*	[-.09, -.01]	-.02 (.02)	[-.05, .01]
A Potential \times P Behaviors	-.01 (.02)	[-.06, .04]	-.02 (.02)	[-.06, .01]
P Potential \times A Behaviors	-.07 (.02)**	[-.11, -.02]	-.06 (.02)***	[-.10, -.02]
P Potential \times P Behaviors	.01 (.02)	[-.03, .05]	-.01 (.02)	[-.05, .02]
A Phase 1 outcome	.34 (.03)***	[.28, .40]	.33 (.03)***	[.27, .38]

Note. $N = 100$ romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner; CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

and commitment, and in Study 2, current actor's self-expansion cognitions also uniquely contributed to these daily outcomes. In Study 2, actor self-expansion potential also predicted greater satisfaction and commitment 2 months later, while partner self-expansion potential and actor expansion behaviors predicted greater satisfaction only. Last, we tested the possibility that self-expansion potential might buffer against lower relationship quality on days with lower behavioral self-expansion. Although we found interactions supporting the general pattern of a buffering effect, the particular interactions that emerged were largely different across the two studies.

Our findings support the relationship forecasting literature, as partners' beliefs about how their relationship might help them grow in the future prospectively predicted their day-to-day engagement in self-expanding activities and day-to-day beliefs about how self-expanding their relationship is. This finding dovetails with studies demonstrating that expected satisfaction predicts later pro-relationship evaluations and behaviors (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016). Also replicating previous research, which has demonstrated various relational benefits associated with engaging in self-expanding activities (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Graham & Harf, 2015; Muise et al., 2019), we found that actor daily self-expansion behaviors were uniquely associated with higher daily relationship satisfaction and commitment, and higher satisfaction 2 months later. However, there were no consistent partner effects of self-expansion behaviors across studies, suggesting that one's partner's reports of shared novel and exciting activities do not necessarily uniquely contribute to relationship quality. Importantly, our findings extend the self-expansion model by revealing that both actor and partner perceptions

of self-expansion potential uniquely predicted higher daily satisfaction and commitment. In addition, actor and partner self-expansion potential predicted satisfaction 2 months later, and actor potential predicted later commitment. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that holding optimistic, growth-oriented beliefs about one's relationship are linked with greater relationship quality and reduced marital distress (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Schoebi et al., 2012). Additionally, we extend the findings of the few existing studies on self-expansion potential in romantic relationships (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006; Sprecher et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2020), demonstrating its links to global relationship evaluations for the first time.

Our research is also the first to examine various facets of self-expansion simultaneously. In doing so, we found that individuals' experiences of perceived self-expansion potential, behaviors, and current cognitions each uniquely contribute to their daily relationship satisfaction and commitment. Interestingly, the effects of current self-expansion cognitions were the largest of the three components of self-expansion included in Study 2, while the effects of perceived potential on daily relationship quality were consistently larger than behavioral self-expansion across both studies. Additionally, perceived potential for self-expansion in the future uniquely contributed to relationship quality 2 months later. This is consistent with the forecasting literature where expected satisfaction was a stronger predictor of commitment and breakup than current experiences of satisfaction (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016). Our findings indicate that traditional measures of self-expansion based on enacted expansion behaviors should be expanded to include other self-expansion components in future research. We suggest that perceived

Table 5

Study 2: Main and Interactive Associations Among Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Potential and Actor and Partner Self-Expansion Behaviors Predicting Follow-Up Satisfaction and Commitment

Predictor	Follow-up satisfaction		Follow-up commitment	
	β (SE)	95% CI	β (SE)	95% CI
Step 1				
Intercept	7.40 (.07)***	[7.26, 7.55]	7.81 (.10)***	[7.62, 8.01]
A expansion potential	.32 (.09)***	[.13, .50]	.39 (.10)***	[.19, .59]
P expansion potential	.17 (.08)*	[.001, .33]	.13 (.09)	[-.06, .32]
A expansion behaviors	.22 (.11)*	[.005, .43]	.19 (.11)	[-.02, .41]
P expansion behaviors	-.01 (.10)	[-.21, .20]	.03 (.11)	[-.19, .25]
A expansion cognitions	-.22 (.11)	[-.44, .005]	-.34 (.12)**	[-.58, -.10]
P expansion cognitions	-.04 (.11)	[-.25, .18]	.02 (.11)	[-.20, .24]
A mean Phase 2 outcome	.69 (.10)***	[.50, .88]	.56 (.11)***	[.35, .77]
Step 2				
Intercept	7.38 (.08)***	[7.23, 7.53]	7.81 (.11)***	[7.60, 8.02]
A expansion potential	.37 (.10)***	[.18, .55]	.41 (.11)***	[.19, .63]
P expansion potential	.17 (.09)	[-.01, .35]	.15 (.10)	[-.06, .36]
A expansion behaviors	.23 (.11)*	[.01, .45]	.22 (.12)	[-.01, .45]
P expansion behaviors	-.04 (.11)	[-.25, .18]	.06 (.12)	[-.18, .29]
A expansion cognitions	-.24 (.12)*	[-.47, -.004]	-.36 (.13)**	[-.61, -.11]
P expansion cognitions	-.02 (.11)	[-.24, .19]	.02 (.12)	[-.22, .25]
A Potential \times A Behaviors	-.01 (.10)	[-.20, .19]	-.06 (.12)	[-.29, .17]
A Potential \times P Behaviors	.09 (.11)	[-.13, .30]	.14 (.13)	[-.13, .40]
P Potential \times A Behaviors	-.002 (.11)	[-.21, .21]	-.02 (.13)	[-.27, .24]
P Potential \times P Behaviors	.03 (.11)	[-.18, .24]	-.15 (.13)	[-.40, .11]
A Mean Phase 2 outcome	.68 (.10)***	[.49, .88]	.46 (.12)***	[.23, .70]

Note. $N = 100$ romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner; CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

self-expansion potential in particular should be more readily and commonly incorporated into conceptualizations of self-expansion.

Finally, we investigated whether there is a buffering effect of self-expansion potential, preserving relationship satisfaction and commitment when behavioral expansion is low, or an amplifying effect, further increasing satisfaction and commitment when behavioral expansion is high. We found support for the general pattern of self-expansion potential being especially important on days when behavioral self-expansion was low, but the specific interactions that emerged were largely different in each study, with only one interaction (Partner Potential \times Actor Behaviors predicting daily commitment) found in both studies. Thus, we interpret these results as somewhat inconclusive and recommend that future research further investigates the buffering function of self-expansion potential in preserving relationship quality.

There were a few different effects in these studies that were theoretically inconsistent. First, in Study 1, we found a negative association between partners' (but not actors') self-expansion behaviors and relationship satisfaction. This is inconsistent with previous research finding that expansion behaviors are beneficial for relationships (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019). However, in all other cases (for commitment in Study 1 and for both satisfaction and commitment in Study 2), partners' self-expansion behaviors were not uniquely associated with relationship quality. Thus, we believe this negative effect may be attributable to Type I error. Similarly, we found a negative association between actors' current self-expansion cognitions and commitment 2 months later. This could also be a Type I error. One alternative explanation is that perceiving high levels of self-expansion

may be beneficial at the moment (hence the daily effects) but decreases over time as couples shift out of the honeymoon phase, similar to other relationship "positives" such as passion and satisfaction (e.g., Carswell et al., 2019; Weber & Baucom, 2022). Decreased self-expansion could create opportunities for upward comparisons (i.e., comparing one's relationship to how great it used to be), which previous research has shown to be associated with lower relationship quality (e.g., Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008). Additionally, partner behaviors and actor and partner current cognitions did not predict future relationship satisfaction. Similarly, partner perceived potential, actor and partner behaviors, and partner current cognitions did not predict future commitment. The lack of long-term partner effects is not surprising, however, given a large-scale meta-analysis found that partner effects may not predict relationship quality beyond actor effects alone (Joel et al., 2020). It is also possible, however, that individual differences in preferences for self-expansion (Hughes et al., 2020) may lead to differential responses (i.e., responding positively vs. negatively) to a partner's attempts to self-expand, resulting in an overall nonsignificant effect. This possibility could be examined in future research.

Our research addresses several limitations of previous studies. For instance, prior work has largely tested the effects of self-expansion in samples of individuals. Interdependence theory, however, posits that the experiences of individuals in a relationship causally affect one another (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, the dyadic nature of our studies provides a more holistic view of self-expansion experiences, adding to the growing couple-level literature in this domain (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Muise et al., 2019). Moreover, we examined both individuals' and their partners' efforts

to engage in behavioral self-expansion separately, rather than using a global shared activities score, allowing us to test the relative contribution of each partner's self-expansion behaviors to relationship quality.

Although the longitudinal design of our studies is an additional strength of this research, allowing us to conclude that self-expansion experiences precede relationship quality, establishing true causal evidence for these associations is an important direction for future research. Experimental and intervention studies have already demonstrated that couples asked to engage in shared self-expanding (vs. neutral or familiar) activities experience increases in relationship quality (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Graham & Harf, 2015). However, to our knowledge, no studies to date have experimentally manipulated self-expansion potential and tested whether changes in potential predict changes in relationship outcomes. Considering our findings, which suggest that self-expansion potential is a stronger predictor of later relationship quality than are self-expansion behaviors, discovering how partners may enhance perceptions of self-expansion potential is a logical next step for future research.

The current research is not without limitations. Our studies included a relatively limited, though broadly worded, list of novel and exciting activities to capture behavioral self-expansion. Future research should consider alternate methods of collecting behavioral self-expansion data, such as using open-ended questions where partners list their self-expansion activities from their perspective (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2020), or a variable-interval approach where participants complete measures at random intervals throughout the day and indicate what behaviors they are currently engaging in. The generalizability of our findings is also limited based on sample characteristics. We collected data largely from monogamous, men–women dyads in relatively established relationships, but it is possible that self-expansion behaviors and potential function differently in other types of relationships (e.g., fledgling, long-distance, or consensually nonmonogamous relationships). For example, fledgling relationships may not have a strong basis for determining self-expansion potential, and thus current cognitions and behaviors may be particularly important in this context. In contrast, long-distance relationships may rely more heavily on perceptions of potential for self-expansion when the couple is reunited in the future. These lines of inquiry are readily amenable to future research.

Conclusion

Altogether, this research reveals the unique contributions of different facets of self-expansion and, specifically, the predictive power of potential for relationship satisfaction and commitment both day to day and over time. Our findings raise interesting questions about how self-expansion experiences inform each other and have potentially important implications for how couples maintain high-quality relationships. Future studies should replicate these effects across more diverse samples, examine a wider variety of self-expansion behaviors, and investigate how experimentally increasing self-expansion potential influences relationship outcomes immediately and longitudinally.

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