The Power of Potential: Relational Self-Expansion Potential and Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors Uniquely Contribute to Relationship Quality Over Time

Kiersten Dobson¹, Sarah C. E. Stanton², & Aishwarya Veeravalli²

¹University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

²University of Edinburgh

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Direct correspondence to Kiersten Dobson, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 222 Bevier Hall, 95 S. Goodwin Ave, Urbana, Illinois, 61801, USA. Email: kdobson@illinois.edu; or Sarah C. E. Stanton, University of Edinburgh, Department of Psychology, 7 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, United Kingdom. Email: sarah.stanton@ed.ac.uk

Author Biographies

Kiersten Dobson is a postdoctoral research associate in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Sarah C. E. Stanton is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh.

Aishwarya Veeravalli is an undergraduate student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Edinburgh.

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Abstract

Self-expansion experiences include perceptions of potential (i.e., beliefs about how self-expanding a relationship could be in the future) and behaviors (i.e., engaging in actual self-expanding activities). In two preregistered dyadic daily experience studies, we examined whether self-expansion potential is an antecedent to behavioral self-expansion, and how potential and behavioral self-expansion uniquely and synergistically predict relationship satisfaction and commitment daily and over time. Results revealed that self-expansion potential prospectively predicted behavioral self-expansion in both studies. Moreover, both self-expansion potential and behaviors separately predicted greater relationship satisfaction and commitment daily (Studies 1-2) and two months later (Study 2), with potential being a stronger predictor than behaviors. The evidence for self-expansion potential protecting satisfaction and commitment when couples did not engage in daily self-expanding activities, however, was somewhat inconclusive. Implications regarding the power of potential to impact relationships are discussed, including the need for future research to consider this important facet of self-expansion.

Keywords: self-expansion, satisfaction, commitment, dyadic data, longitudinal

The Power of Potential: Relational Self-Expansion Potential and Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors Uniquely Contribute to Relationship Quality Over Time

Positive relationship experiences with romantic partners are a key aspect of living well. The self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996; Aron et al., 2013) proposes that people are intrinsically motivated to enhance their self-efficacy, which occurs by engaging in novel, challenging, and exciting activities, and incorporating others' perspectives and experiences into their self-concept. Close relationships (especially romantic relationships) are key facilitators of self-expansion, and self-expansion, in turn, aids in relationship maintenance (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019). Beyond enacting self-expanding *behaviors*, partners also hold cognitive beliefs about the *potential* for their relationship to offer future self-expansion opportunities (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). This optimism has been linked to personal and relational benefits (e.g., Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006; Stanton et al., 2020), but is woefully understudied. In the current research, we investigated whether self-expansion potential is an antecedent of engaging in self-expansion behaviors and tested the unique contributions of self-expansion potential and behaviors to relationship quality over time.

Although much is known about the relationship outcomes associated with partners' beliefs about how self-expanding their relationship is *currently* (e.g., Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Mattingly et al., 2012, 2019; VanderDrift et al., 2011), empirical studies have largely neglected the role of *future* self-expansion perceptions in relationships. This distinction matters because people are motivated both by current and future rewards (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), and relationship expectations have important consequences for relationship quality (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 argue that self-expansion potential is a critical forecasting variable in relationships, and although related to constructs like forecasted satisfaction, it is conceptually distinguished by its emphasis on anticipating opportunities for future growth and exciting experiences, rather than estimating future happiness. Just as previous research has linked greater perceptions of future 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 (**Confirmatory Hypothesis 1 [CH1]**).

We suggest self-expansion potential is vital in relationships not only because it may precede engaging in novel, exciting activities with one's partner, but also because it should exert unique effects on partners' relationship quality. The literature on self-expansion potential is nascent, with only three published papers investigating the construct at the time of writing. However, the evidence thus far points to self-expansion potential's beneficial role in relationships, with self-expansion potential being linked to lower susceptibility to infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006), early romantic attraction (Sprecher et al., 2015), and better perceived health via higher positive affect (Stanton et al., 2020). In light of these findings, we predicted that one's *own* (actor; **CH2a**) and one's *partner's* (partner; **CH2b**) self-expansion potential would positively predict relationship satisfaction and commitment over time.

Shared self-expansion behaviors (e.g., watching a new movie or taking a spontaneous trip together) are similarly essential 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; Carson et al., 2007; Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Graham & Harf, 2015; Muise et al., 2019). Thus, maintaining and capitalizing on opportunities for self-expansion is pertinent to sustaining long-term romantic relationships. In the current research, we expected to replicate previous studies such that both one's *own* (actor; **CH3a**) and one's *partner's* (partner; **CH3b**) behavioral self-expansion would positively predict relationship satisfaction and commitment over time.

Finally, it is possible that self-expansion potential and behaviors might synergistically predict relationship quality. 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. 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 (**CH4**). 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) (**Exploratory Hypothesis 1 [EH1]**).

The Current Research

We tested the associations between self-expansion potential, 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. We also tested the unique contributions of self-expansion

potential and behaviors to relationship satisfaction and commitment daily (Studies 1-2) and two months later (Study 2). Lastly, we explored the possible buffering function of self-expansion potential on relationship quality over time. Our studies were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (Study 1: <https://osf.io/2b68a>; Study 2: <https://osf.io/hxtma>)¹. The materials, data, and code for both studies are publicly available (<https://osf.io/8tm4a/>).

In addition to systematically investigating self-expansion potential and behaviors simultaneously for the first time, 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 (Kelley et al., 1983; 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. This allows us to test the relative contribution of each partner's self-expansion behaviors to relationship quality.

Study 1

Method

Participants

The original sample was 130 cohabiting couples, but 15 couples were excluded from analyses because one or both partners did not consent to participate ($N = 5$) or did

¹ 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/>.

not meet inclusion criteria ($N = 10$). The final sample comprised 115 heterosexual romantic 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; Meltzer et al., 2017) but includes more diary days (21 vs. 14 days), resulting in 4339 data points. Participants were 19-64 years of age ($M_{\text{years}} = 30.78$, $SD_{\text{years}} = 8.99$) and 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.

Measures and Procedure

Data were taken from a larger longitudinal study of couples' daily relationship and sexual experiences (see <https://osf.io/42npz/>). The study involved an initial 30-minute 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-minute 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 5-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.

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"). 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 modelling (MLM), nesting partners' scores within a group of $N = 2$ as per Kenny et al.'s (2006) suggestions regarding the use of MLM with indistinguishable dyadic data.

We first ran an over-time APIM with actor and partner baseline self-expansion potential predicting self-expansion behaviors over the next 21 days (testing CH1). 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 (testing CH2 and CH3). 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 (testing CH4). 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 (testing EH1). For ease of interpretation and to provide estimates of effect size, we standardized continuous predictors.

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

Consistent with CH1, individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential enacted more self-expansion behaviors over the next 21 days, $\beta(SE) = .15(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.06, .25]$, $p = .001$. Moreover, individuals whose *partners* reported higher self-expansion potential enacted more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .15(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.06, .24]$, $p = .002$.

Associations between Self-Expansion Experiences and Daily Satisfaction and Commitment

As seen in Table 2, and consistent with CH2a, 2b, and 3a, daily relationship satisfaction and commitment were higher when individuals or their partners reported higher baseline self-expansion potential and when individuals reported higher daily behavioral self-expansion. Effects were stronger for self-expansion potential than self-expansion behaviors. No partner effect emerged for daily behavioral self-expansion predicting daily satisfaction or commitment (inconsistent with CH3b).

We also found preliminary evidence for CH4 and EH1. One interaction emerged for satisfaction and four interactions emerged for commitment. 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 were more satisfied day-to-day when their partner reported more daily behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .35(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.30, .40]$, $p < .001$) or less daily behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .41(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.36, .46]$, $p < .001$). The slope was steeper for those whose

partner reported less behavioral self-expansion, suggesting a buffering effect of potential.

Supporting CH4, a significant Actor $\times$ Actor interaction emerged for commitment. Individuals reporting higher self-expansion potential were more committed day-to-day when they reported more daily self-expansion behaviors ($\beta(SE) = .44(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.38, .50]$, $p < .001$) or fewer daily self-expansion behaviors ($\beta(SE) = .50(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.43, .56]$, $p < .001$). 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 were more committed day-to-day when their partner reported more daily self-expansion behaviors ($\beta(SE) = .41(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.34, .47]$, $p < .001$) or fewer self-expansion behaviors ($\beta(SE) = .53(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.47, .59]$, $p < .001$). 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, $\beta(SE) = .03(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [-.04, .10]$, $p = .359$. However, individuals reporting fewer self-expansion behaviors whose partner perceived higher self-expansion potential reported higher commitment, $\beta(SE) = .19(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.12, .25]$, $p < .001$, 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, $\beta(SE) = .21(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.15, .27]$, $p < .001$. Individuals whose partner reported fewer daily self-expansion behaviors felt equivalently committed day-to-day regardless of their self-expansion

potential, $\beta(SE) = .01(.03)$, $CI_{95\%} = [-.06, .07]$, $p = .837$. This interaction opposes a buffering effect of potential.

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

		Descriptives and Reliability			Correlations			
	Variable	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α or <i>R</i> _c	1	2	3	4
1	Self-Expansion Potential	1.20-7.00	5.99(1.08)	.87	.26***	.15***	.60***	.56***
2	Daily Expansion Behaviors	0.00-5.00	1.62(1.49)	N/A		.47***	.22***	.19***
3	Daily Satisfaction	1.00-5.00	4.42(0.71)	.80			.52***	.76***
4	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.

****p* < .001

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	
	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}
Step 1				
A Expansion Potential	.39(.02)***	[.34, .44]	.49(.03)***	[.43, .55]
P Expansion Potential	.10(.02)***	[.05, .15]	.11(.03)***	[.06, .17]
A Expansion Behaviors	.06(.01)***	[.05, .08]	.06(.01)***	[.04, .08]
P Expansion Behaviors	-.01(.01)	[-.03, .001]	-.0005(.01)	[-.02, .02]
Step 2				
A Expansion Potential	.38(.02)***	[.33, .43]	.47(.03)***	[.41, .53]
P Expansion Potential	.10(.02)***	[.05, .15]	.11(.03)***	[.05, .17]
A Expansion Behaviors	.06(.01)***	[.05, .08]	.07(.01)***	[.05, .09]
P Expansion Behaviors	-.01(.01)	[-.03, .003]	-.01(.01)	[-.03, .02]
A Potential $\times$ A Behaviors	-.003(.01)	[-.02, .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)	[-.03, -.01]	-.08(.01)***	[-.11, -.05]
P Potential $\times$ P Behaviors	.02(.01)	[-.003, .03]	.10(.01)***	[.07, .13]

Note. $N = 115$ romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner.

* $p < .05$, *** $p \leq .001$

Study 2

In Study 1, we found evidence that perceived future self-expansion potential predicted later daily engagement in self-expansion activities, and both factors independently predicted relationship satisfaction and commitment over 21 days. The goal of Study 2 was to replicate and extend these findings in another dyadic daily experience study, with the addition of a follow-up survey two months later to examine lasting effects.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 100 romantic couples (87 heterosexual, 9 lesbian, 1 gay, 3 other non-binary) 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 (<https://robert-ackerman.shinyapps.io/APIMPowerR/>) suggesting that 100 couples would provide 84% power for small-to-medium cross-sectional effects. Participants were 18-64 years of age ($M_{\text{years}} = 24.15$, $SD_{\text{years}} = 6.61$) and were in relationships lasting 3 months to 35.50 years ($M_{\text{years}} = 2.84$, $SD_{\text{years}} = 4.41$). Approximately 85.50% of participants were casually or exclusively dating their current partner, and 14.50% were common-law, engaged, in a civil partnership, or married.

Measures and Procedure

Data were taken from a larger longitudinal study of couples' relationship experiences (see <https://osf.io/ekv6x/>). The study involved an initial 2-hour lab session (Phase 1), a 14-day diary period (Phase 2), and a follow-up survey two 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-minute 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 4:00PM each day, and partners were asked to complete their survey separately and privately before 11:59PM. 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 two months after Phase 2. Participants were asked to complete a final 45-minute online survey, which included satisfaction and commitment measures. The Phase 3 survey links were also individual. Participants had up to one 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 Study 1.

Baseline Satisfaction and Commitment. Participants completed the satisfaction subscale of the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998), a 5-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 7-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. Baseline satisfaction and commitment were used as covariates in the analyses involving follow-up satisfaction and commitment.

Phase 2 Measures

Daily Self-Expansion Behaviors. Participants completed a checklist measure of six self-expansion behaviors adapted from Harasymchuk & 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 Study 1.

Daily Satisfaction and Commitment. Participants completed a one-item measure of 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?”) taken 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 two other moderated over-time APIMs with follow-up satisfaction and

commitment as outcome variables. In the follow-up models, we included the respective baseline score as a covariate. 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

Behaviors

Consistent with Study 1, individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential reported more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .11(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.01, .21]$, $p = .026$. Moreover, individuals whose *partners* reported higher self-expansion potential enacted more daily behavioral self-expansion, $\beta(SE) = .16(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.06, .26]$, $p = .002$.

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, both daily and follow-up satisfaction were higher when individuals or their partners perceived higher baseline self-expansion potential and when individuals reported higher daily behavioral self-expansion. Partner self-expansion behaviors predicted daily but not follow-up relationship satisfaction. Partner self-expansion potential predicted both daily and follow-up commitment, while actor potential and actor behavior predicted only daily commitment. Partner self-expansion behavior did not predict daily or follow-up commitment. Of note, the associations between partner self-expansion potential and follow-up relationship satisfaction and commitment were no longer significant when the interaction terms were added. However, none of these interactions were significant and therefore absorb unnecessary variance. Thus, we interpret the effects in Step 1 for follow-up models.

Two interactions emerged for daily satisfaction and one interaction emerged for daily commitment. A significant Actor $\times$ Actor interaction emerged for daily satisfaction. Individuals perceiving higher self-expansion potential were more satisfied day-to-day when they reported more daily behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .33(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.23, .42]$, $p < .001$) or less daily behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .42(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.33, .52]$, $p < .001$). The slope was steeper for those engaging in fewer self-expansion behaviors, suggesting a buffering effect of potential. Although this interaction was not found in Study 1, the direction of the effect is similar and consistent with CH4.

Additionally, a significant Partner $\times$ Actor interaction emerged for daily satisfaction. When their partner perceived higher self-expansion potential, individuals were more satisfied day-to-day when they reported engaging in more behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .10(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.001, .20]$, $p = .048$) or less behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .26(.05)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.17, .35]$, $p < .001$). The slope was steeper for those engaging in fewer self-expansion behaviors, 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 ($\beta(SE) = .14(.04)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.05, .23]$, $p = .001$) or less behavioral self-expansion ($\beta(SE) = .29(.04)$, $CI_{95\%} = [.20, .37]$, $p < .001$). 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 occur solely at the daily level.

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

	Variable	Descriptives and Reliability			Correlations					
		Range	<i>M(SD)</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Self-Expansion Potential	2.80-7.00	6.08(0.91)	.86	.14***	.09***	.37***	.37***	.44***	.40***
2	Daily Expansion Behaviors	0.00-6.00	1.69(1.44)	N/A		.50***	.24***	.20***	.16***	.11***
3	Daily Satisfaction	1.00-7.00	6.22(1.20)	N/A			.46***	.74***	.47***	.33***
4	Daily Commitment	1.00-7.00	6.52(0.99)	N/A				.42***	.49***	.39***
5	Follow-Up Satisfaction	1.00-9.00	7.47(1.27)	.88					.11***	.63***
6	Follow-Up Commitment	3.71-9.00	7.85(1.30)	.86						.43***

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.

****p* < .001

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	
	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}
Step 1				
A Expansion Potential	.39(.04)***	[.30, .47]	.32(.04)***	[.24, .40]
P Expansion Potential	.20(.04)***	[.11, .29]	.23(.04)***	[.15, .31]
A Expansion Behaviors	.17(.02)***	[.12, .21]	.08(.02)***	[.05, .11]
P Expansion Behaviors	.05(.02)*	[.01, .09]	.03(.02)	[-.01, .06]
Step 2				
A Expansion Potential	.38(.04)***	[.29, .46]	.31(.04)***	[.23, .38]
P Expansion Potential	.18(.04)***	[.10, .27]	.21(.04)***	[.14, .29]
A Expansion Behaviors	.18(.02)***	[.13, .27]	.09(.02)***	[.05, .12]
P Expansion Behaviors	.04(.02)*	[.003, .09]	.03(.02)	[-.01, .06]
A Potential $\times$ A Behaviors	-.05(.02)*	[-.09, -.003]	-.01(.02)	[-.05, .02]
A Potential $\times$ P Behaviors	-.01(.02)	[-.06, .04]	-.02(.02)	[-.06, .02]
P Potential $\times$ A Behaviors	-.08(.02)***	[-.12, -.03]	-.07(.02)***	[-.11, -.04]
P Potential $\times$ P Behaviors	.004(.02)	[-.04, .05]	-.02(.02)	[-.06, -.01]

Note. $N = 100$ romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner.

* $p < .05$, *** $p \leq .001$

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	
	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}	$\beta(SE)$	CI _{95%}
Step 1				
A Expansion Potential	.19(.09)*	[.02, .36]	-.06(.08)	[-.21, .10]
P Expansion Potential	.17(.08)*	[.02, .31]	.14(.07)*	[.01, .28]
A Expansion Behaviors	.22(.09)*	[.03, .39]	.09(.08)	[-.07, .25]
P Expansion Behaviors	.01(.09)	[-.16, .18]	.07(.08)	[-.09, .23]
Step 2				
A Expansion Potential	.19(.09)*	[.01, .37]	-.06(.08)	[-.22, .10]
P Expansion Potential	.14(.08)	[-.02, .30]	.11(.07)	[-.03, .25]
A Expansion Behaviors	.22(.09)*	[.04, .40]	.11(.08)	[-.06, .27]
P Expansion Behaviors	-.01(.09)	[-.19, .18]	.08(.08)	[-.09, .25]
A Potential $\times$ A Behaviors	.01(.09)	[-.17, .19]	-.05(.08)	[-.21, .11]
A Potential $\times$ P Behaviors	.03(.10)	[-.17, .23]	.05(.09)	[-.12, .23]
P Potential $\times$ A Behaviors	-.11(.10)	[-.31, .09]	-.08(.09)	[-.25, .10]
P Potential $\times$ P Behaviors	.06(.10)	[-.14, .27]	-.03(.09)	[-.21, .15]

Note. $N = 100$ romantic couples. A = actor; P = partner. Baseline satisfaction was included as a covariate in the follow-up satisfaction model, and baseline commitment was included as a covariate in the follow-up commitment model.

* $p < .05$

General Discussion

Extending the self-expansion model and the relationship forecasting literature, across two dyadic daily experience studies we found that baseline self-expansion potential predicted later engagement in shared self-expanding activities. Results also revealed that actor and partner self-expansion potential and actor self-expansion behaviors uniquely predicted greater daily satisfaction and commitment in both studies. In Study 2, actor self-expansion potential and behaviors also predicted greater satisfaction (but not commitment) two months later, and partner self-expansion potential predicted greater satisfaction and commitment two months later. Lastly, 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 engagement in activities contributing to that growth. This finding dovetails with studies demonstrating that expected satisfaction predicts later pro-relationship evaluations and behaviors (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016). Interestingly, prior literature suggests that individuals' relationship forecasts are drawn from their current experiences (Baker et al., 2017), which raises intriguing questions about a possible cyclical association between self-expansion potential and behaviors. That is, current experiences of self-expansion behaviors may inform self-expansion potential beliefs, which may then feed into additional engagement in self-expansion behaviors. If this is the case, in the event of a relationship "slump," where partners may engage in fewer self-expansion behaviors, they may perceive less potential for self-

expansion in the future and actually enact fewer self-expansion behaviors moving forward as their views toward the relationship become more pessimistic. Future research should examine this cyclical association and determine ways to break the cycle and preserve relationship quality when self-expansion potential or behaviors are low.

Replicating previous research demonstrating 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 associated with higher daily relationship satisfaction and commitment, and higher satisfaction two months later. However, there were no consistent partner effects of self-expansion behaviors, suggesting that one's partner's reports of shared novel and exciting activities do not necessarily contribute to relationship quality. Importantly, our findings extend the self-expansion model by revealing that both actor *and* partner perceptions of self-expansion potential predicted higher daily satisfaction and commitment. In addition, actor and partner self-expansion potential predicted satisfaction two months later, and partner 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 (Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Schoebi et al., 2012; Srivastava et al., 2006). 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 self-expansion potential and behaviors simultaneously. Interestingly, although the long-term effects were more comparable across self-expansion components, the effects of self-expansion potential on daily

relationship quality were consistently larger than behavioral self-expansion, with actor self-expansion potential having the strongest effect. 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 forecasted self-expansion should be more readily and commonly incorporated into conceptualizations of self-expansion and should be considered alongside traditional measures based on enacted expansion behaviors.

Finally, we investigated whether there is a buffering effect of self-expansion potential, preserving relationship satisfaction and commitment when behavioral expansion is low. 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 investigate the buffering function of self-expansion potential in preserving relationship quality.

Although the longitudinal design of our studies allows 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, 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 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 heterosexual couples 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 non-monogamous relationships).

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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