

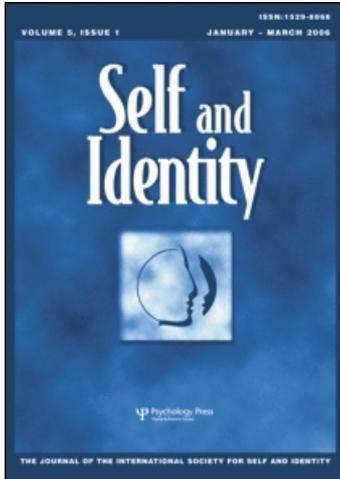
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Interpersonal Affirmation and Self-authenticity: A Test of Rogers's Self-growth Hypothesis

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Interpersonal relationships, including romantic attachments, are vital for personal well-being. Likewise, characteristics of the self, including one's sense of self-authenticity, influence human flourishing. Integrating these two perspectives, the current research builds on Rogers's (1961) notion that a close, supportive relationship can foster positive changes in the self. We propose a model that connects patterns of interpersonal affirmation (as described by the Michelangelo phenomenon) with increased self-authenticity. We tested this model using a correlational design and responses from undergraduates currently in dating relationships (60 males, 27 females). Structural equation modeling revealed that interpersonal processes promote self-authenticity inasmuch as individuals perceive their partners as being supportive. The model's implications for the interplay between self and other are discussed.

Keywords: Interpersonal affirmation; Michelangelo phenomenon; Self-authenticity; Self-growth.

When two people form a close relationship, the interpersonal patterns they create not only reflect but also affect important aspects of each individual. How exactly these patterns affect behaviors, expectations, motivations, and perceptions is not fully known; yet this question has important consequences. For example, if Lydia is involved in a relationship characterized by ongoing criticism and censorship, she may inhibit the genuine expression of her self. Humanistic and organismic perspectives on personality suggest that such restraints on self-expression cultivate distress and maladjustment (Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Conversely, Lydia's partner may actively support her freedom to be herself. Such a positive, affirming relationship may afford her greater psychological health and well-being. A model of relationship processes that identifies how

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interpersonal patterns shape self-authenticity has not yet been constructed. The present research responds to the need for such a model.

Social-psychological theories aimed at understanding health and well-being can approach the problem by focusing on either the relationship or the self. In the former case, it is widely understood that frequent and meaningful interactions with others promote healthy functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals who have regular exchanges with caring others tend to be happier, healthier, and better able to cope with everyday stresses. Conversely, those deprived of close social ties tend to have weaker immune systems, suffer from more health problems, and have a higher risk of mental illness and suicide (Joiner, 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Humanistic and phenomenological models of well-being center on the self and the concept of authenticity. To operate authentically is to be true to oneself. The authenticity perspective emphasizes the importance of self-expression, self-awareness, and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rogers, 1961). It also recognizes that not all contexts and roles afford the same degree of authentic expression (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). For example, if Lydia is high in openness but her parents are traditionalists, Lydia may feel censored and unaccepted in the family context. She may seek alternative situations that support her authentic self-expression. Recent research has shown that experiencing authenticity is related to self-actualization tendencies, vitality, and mindfulness (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Authenticity has also been associated with self-concept clarity and integration (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Both interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives are prominent features of Carl Rogers's therapeutic model. Rogers (1961) believed that relationships marked by unconditional positive regard and genuineness enable individuals to flourish. Such relationships provide a safe context for learning self-acceptance. Rogers (1961) argued that through the process of self-authentication:

... the individual moves toward being, knowingly and acceptingly, the process which he inwardly and actually is. He moves away from being what he is not, from being a façade ... He is increasingly listening to the deepest recesses of his physiological and emotional being, and finds himself increasingly willing to be, with greater accuracy and depth, that self which he most truly is. (pp. 175–176)

Rogers emphasized authenticity as a central therapeutic goal and viewed social relationships as critical for self-growth. He hypothesized that by establishing genuine, accepting, and empathetic relationships with his clients, he helped them take risks and “become themselves” (Rogers, 1961, p. 123). A helping relationship, he believed, affords self-discovery and personal growth.

Although Rogers focused on the clinical setting, he assumed that any number of relational contexts could promote authenticity. Romantic relationships are one such context. Romantic partners are uniquely poised to influence the self, occupying a disproportionate amount of a person's time and attention (Fazio, Effrein, & Falender, 1981). They are accorded a special place in the self's autobiographical memories, attributions, and emotions (Berscheid, 1994) and can become part of the self's own cognitive representation (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Significant others are distinct even from best friends in that they satisfy a variety of needs (e.g., emotional, sexual, security). People also tend to be particularly dependent on and committed to their romantic partners (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998).

A romantic relationship characterized by strong interdependence has the potential to provide a context ripe for self-growth, discovery, and development. This is particularly true when processes of behavioral confirmation are considered. A partner's beliefs and expectations regarding the self can encourage certain traits and behaviors while discouraging others (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Over time, behaviors initially enacted only in the relationship context may become regular responses to diverse situations (Fazio et al., 1981) and stable patterns of behavior (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Interdependence theory and behavioral confirmation provide a theoretical background for the Michelangelo phenomenon, a pattern of affirming perceptions and behaviors that promote self-growth (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Wolf, & Estrada, 2006; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Stocker, & Wolf, 2005). The self can grow towards its ideal if it is buttressed by scaffolding provided by the partner. Like Michelangelo Buonarroti who chiseled marble to reveal a beautiful human form, a partner can offer affirmation that encourages the self to move towards its ideal. Not surprisingly, the Michelangelo phenomenon is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being, and its components are negatively linked to break-ups and loneliness (Drigotas, 2000).

The Michelangelo phenomenon maps well onto Rogers's concept of other-assisted self-growth and allows for a test of his key hypothesis. The interpersonal affirmation central to the Michelangelo phenomenon may not only draw forth the ideal self but may also facilitate self-authenticity, a key element in Rogers's model of human flourishing. As a person is encouraged towards her ideal self by a partner, she can discard "false front[s]" (Rogers, 1961, p. 11) and adopt a more authentic pattern of behavior. In other words, interpersonal affirmation may facilitate movement towards the ideal, which may result in increased psychological authenticity.

Kernis and Goldman (2005) defined dispositional authenticity as the "unobstructed operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 32). In line with Rogers's (1961) perspective, they identify self-awareness as its fundamental element. Self-awareness reflects a person's knowledge and understanding of her own traits, motives, affect, strengths, weaknesses, and other self-relevant material. The second element, unbiased cognitive processing, concerns how objectively an individual can process self-information. Next, authentic behavior describes an individual's tendency to act in accord with her beliefs or values. The final element, relational authenticity, is particularly relevant in the current research. The degree to which an individual seeks to be genuine with others, wants others to see her for who she is, and willingly discloses self-information may vary as a function of the affirmation she receives for her ideal self.

Authenticity has been positively associated with self-esteem, life satisfaction, vitality, mindfulness, and self-actualization, and inversely related to negative affect and contingent self-esteem (the degree to which self-worth depends on meeting others' expectations; Goldman & Kernis, 2002). People high in authenticity also tend to implement more adaptive coping strategies and react less defensively than those with low authenticity (see Kernis & Goldman, 2006, for a review). While much research has focused on authenticity as a dispositional variable, the current research construes authenticity as a capacity. A fixed state of authenticity is an inadequate representation of human experience. As Rogers (1961) proposed, authenticity is dynamic: people oscillate from lesser to greater congruence between

their actual and ideal self as they continually strive towards “the good life” (p. 187). Authenticity in this vein can be influenced and can be a consequence of interpersonal processes.

Overview and Hypotheses

The goal of the present study was to test a model based on Rogers’s hypothesis that affirming interpersonal relationships promotes self-authenticity, a fundamental component of psychological health and well-being. As such, this research builds a bridge between two traditionally separate approaches to well-being: one that identifies the positive consequences of relationships and one that focuses on the positive effects of a fully functioning authentic self. We tested our model in the context of romantic relationships and observed how the Michelangelo phenomenon’s affirming processes related to authenticity. Our model proposes that perceptual and behavioral affirmation promote movement towards the ideal, which in turn facilitates authenticity. Thus, we expected that the last stage of the Michelangelo phenomenon, movement towards the ideal, would be the key mechanism eliciting authenticity. Our use of a correlational design precluded causal inference but permitted an initial test of our model’s proposed structure.

We also hypothesized that the Michelangelo phenomenon would more fully explain relationship satisfaction than individual differences in self-esteem or optimism. Both self-esteem (i.e., a global sense of self-worth) and optimism (i.e., a general expectation that good things will happen) are associated with relationship satisfaction (Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006). We expected, however, that interpersonally facilitated self-growth would predict relationship satisfaction above and beyond these dispositional characteristics. Thus, our first hypothesis was that Rogers’s notion of affirmation and growth could be demonstrated by looking at how the Michelangelo phenomenon promotes self-authenticity. Our second hypothesis was that relationship dynamics would explain relationship satisfaction better than self-variables.

Method

Participants

We recruited 241 Brown University students to participate in a study on relationships either for course credit ($n=100$) or as part of a class exercise ($n=141$). Those who identified as “single” were allocated to a study not discussed here, resulting in a sample of 60 females and 27 males ($M_{\text{age}}=20.10$, $SD=1.42$) for the current research. Fifty of these students received course credit for their participation while the remainder completed the measures as part of a class exercise ($n=37$). Most respondents ($n=66$) identified themselves as White and heterosexual ($n=80$) and of the 61 who reported their ethnicity, 47 were of European or Caucasian descent. Following from previous work (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), we used relationship status as an indicator of couples’ interdependence and commitment. Of our sample, 10.47% described their relationship as “dating casually,” 10.47% as “dating regularly,” 74.41% as “dating steadily,” and 4.65% as “engaged or married.” At the time of data collection, average relationship duration was 1.35 years ($SD=1.36$) and partners indicated they generally spent 17.17 waking

hours ($SD = 16.59$) together per week. Participants reported talking on the phone for an average of 4.66 hours ($SD = 6.16$) a week and spending 2.55 hours ($SD = 4.26$) e-mailing or instant messaging with their partners. Almost all ($n = 80$) participants reported that their relationship was exclusive.

Measures

Our study began with a set of demographic questions regarding gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation, followed by questions about relationship status and time spent with partner. Participants then completed the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) as a measure of optimism. The LOT-R contains 7 critical items ($\alpha = .75$) such as "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best." Participants responded on a scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) and higher sum scores indicated greater optimism. Our sample was fairly optimistic on average ($M = 15.93$, $SD = 3.99$). The 10 statements of Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = .87$) measured global self-worth. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement using a scale of 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*) and exhibited moderately high self-esteem on average ($M = 31.87$, $SD = 5.29$).

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). Previous research has shown that the RAS is associated with Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale ($r = .80$, $r = .84$; Hendrick, 1988; Vaughn & Baier, 1999, respectively) and adequately discriminates between couples who stay together and those who break up (Hendrick, 1988). On a scale of 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction, participants responded to questions such as "How much do you love your partner?" ($\alpha = .85$). On the whole, participants were satisfied with their relationships ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.66$).

Following from previous literature (Drigotas et al., 1999), the two critical processes of the Michelangelo phenomenon, perceptual affirmation and behavioral affirmation, were each measured using three items and a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely*; $\alpha = .84$ and $\alpha = .73$, respectively). Participants reported experiencing both perceptual ($M = 6.21$, $SD = 1.18$) and behavioral affirmation ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 1.12$) from their partners. These means and standard deviations are consistent with the literature (Drigotas et al., 1999).

Participants then listed four of the most important characteristics of their ideal self. For each characteristic, they used a 9-point scale ($-4 =$ have become less like this characteristic; $+4 =$ have become more like this characteristic) to rate how they have changed as a result of being involved with their partner. With a possible range of -16 to 16 and higher scores indicating more movement towards the ideal, sum scores were noticeably above the midpoint ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 4.18$). The internal consistency among these four items was less than ideal ($\alpha = .48$) but similar to that found in previous research ($\alpha = .51$; Drigotas et al., 1999).

We measured authenticity using the 45-item third version of the Authenticity Inventory (AI-3; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). On a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) participants responded to items such as "For better or worse, I am aware of who I am." These items were divided to represent authenticity as four domains: self-awareness ($M = 45.97$, $SD = 6.12$), unbiased cognitive processing ($M = 34.58$, $SD = 4.69$), authentic behavior ($M = 36.77$, $SD = 4.60$), and relational authenticity ($M = 46.62$, $SD = 6.79$). Subscales were internally consistent on average ($\alpha = .69$) with α ranging from .55 to .81.

We used the 16-item Functional Flexibility Index (FFI; Paulhus & Martin, 1988) as a second measure of authenticity. The FFI permits the endorsement of opposing traits (i.e., ambitious–lazy) and gauges people’s ability to behave differently in different situations. Responses to the primary subscale suggested that participants felt capable of being themselves in multiple situations ($M = 94.63$, $SD = 9.79$). At the same time, they reported a moderate degree of difficulty ($M = 51.63$, $SD = 12.59$) and anxiety ($M = 52.23$, $SD = 17.57$) when expressing different sides of themselves and indicated a tendency to avoid such situations ($M = 51.21$, $SD = 13.29$). The four subscales exhibited moderate internal consistency on average ($\alpha = .61$) with α ranging from .46 to .80. Because authenticity suggests a well-integrated and strong sense of self, we expected to replicate findings that the AI-3 is positively related to situational capability and negatively related to difficulty, anxiety, and avoidance (Kernis & Goldman, 2005).

Procedure

The experimenter presented each participant with a packet of measures. Each participant responded to a series of demographic and relationship history questions before proceeding to the remaining counterbalanced measures, which are described in detail in the previous section. At the conclusion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Overview of Data Analyses

Correlational and regression analyses were conducted to test previously found relations between perceptual affirmation, behavioral affirmation, and movement towards the ideal. These methods were also used to examine how the factors of the Michelangelo phenomenon, optimism, and self-esteem predict relationship satisfaction. The adequacy of our proposed model linking interpersonal processes with self-authenticity was evaluated using structural equation modeling (SEM). This technique takes a theory-confirming approach, assesses both measured and latent (unmeasured) variables, and allows for comparison against competing models (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). Our particular theoretical interest was the possibility that interpersonal processes produce changes in psychological authenticity. While our design did not permit causal inference, we could use SEM to assess theorized dependencies between variables—directions of effect—while estimating and removing measurement error, leaving only common variance.

Results

The Michelangelo Phenomenon

Before proceeding with the test of our primary hypothesis, we confirmed the presence of key associations expected from previous research (Drigotas et al., 1999). We expected the Michelangelo processes to be interrelated and behavioral affirmation, not perceptual affirmation, to more fully explain movement towards the ideal. We found a strong positive association between perceptual and behavioral affirmation, $r(85) = .74$, $p < .01$. Both elements were also related to movement towards the ideal, $r(82) = .33$, $p < .01$ and $r(82) = .38$, $p < .01$, respectively. We then

tested for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). In a multiple regression model ($R^2 = .16$), movement towards the ideal was predicted only by behavioral affirmation, $\beta = .32$, $t = 2.10$, $p < .05$, not perceptual affirmation, $\beta = .11$. The results of a Sobel's test suggested behavioral affirmation fully mediated the association between perceptual affirmation and movement towards the ideal, $z = 3.54$, $p < .01$.

The Michelangelo Phenomenon and Self-authenticity

Our primary hypothesis was that individuals who experience interpersonal affirmation and movement towards the ideal would also experience greater psychological authenticity. Initial support for this idea was found in correlational analyses, the results of which are shown in Table 1. We then formulated a theoretical model connecting the Michelangelo phenomenon and authenticity. According to this model, perceptual affirmation influences behavioral affirmation, which in turn facilitates movement towards the ideal. Finally, the model suggests that movement towards the ideal affects self-authenticity. The specified paths suggest a sequential temporal relation between variables (i.e., one variable leads to another); however, SEM uses a snapshot of the variables measured at one time. We therefore explicitly

TABLE 1 Correlations between the Elements of the Michelangelo Phenomenon and Self-esteem with Both Authenticity and Functional Flexibility

	Authenticity			
	Self-awareness	Unbiased processing	Behavioral authenticity	Relational authenticity
Perceptual affirmation	.19	.10	.03	.19
Behavioral affirmation	.22*	.09	.06	.26*
Movement towards the ideal	.29**	.17	-.05	.26*
Self-esteem	.54**	.54**	.03	.27*
	Functional flexibility			
	Capability	Difficulty	Anxiety	Avoidance
Perceptual affirmation	.19	-.13	-.03	-.31**
Behavioral affirmation	.23*	-.24*	-.14	-.34**
Movement towards the ideal	.30**	-.21	-.23*	-.24*
Self-esteem	.20	-.23*	-.47**	-.25*
	Self and relationship variables			
	Self-esteem	Optimism	Relationship satisfaction	
Perceptual affirmation	.12	-.02	.48**	
Behavioral affirmation	.26*	.04	.69**	
Movement towards the ideal	.30*	.07	.41**	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

assumed that the Michelangelo processes are sufficiently gradual that we could observe their effect on authenticity.

Model fit was ascertained using chi-squared difference tests and descriptive measures of goodness of fit including the comparative fit index (CFI), the relative chi-squared (CMIN/DF), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the probability of a close fit (PCLOSE; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003). We then compared our hypothesized model with models derived from alternative theories. These comparisons took into account (1) the statistical fit of each model with the data, (2) parsimony, and (3) whether the model parameters were significant and could be meaningfully interpreted.

We constructed two alternative models for comparative purposes. The first model assumed that differences in dispositional authenticity (Goldman & Kernis, 2002) influence the Michelangelo phenomenon. A person high in dispositional authenticity may be particularly attuned to partner affirmation and may more readily move towards her ideal. Accordingly, in this alternative model each aspect of the Michelangelo phenomenon depends on authenticity.

The second alternative model tested the conjecture that, in addition to movement towards the ideal, behavioral affirmation directly drives self-authenticity. Here the role of movement towards the ideal is minimized while the perception of a partner's behaviors is theoretically emphasized. Thus, this second alternative model includes a direct path from behavioral affirmation to authenticity and another path from movement towards the ideal to authenticity.

Each model was tested using a covariance matrix and maximum likelihood estimation on AMOS (version 16.0; Arbuckle, 2006). Perceptual affirmation, behavioral affirmation, and movement towards the ideal were treated as observed, exogenous variables. Authenticity was tested as an unobserved latent variable while its subscales (self-awareness, unbiased processing, relational authenticity, and behavioral authenticity) were tested as observed, exogenous variables.

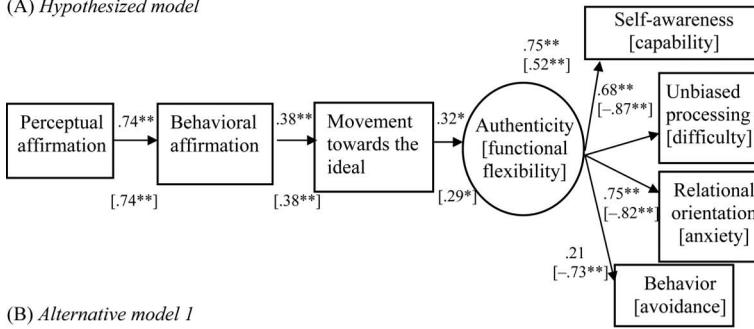
We evaluated our hypothesized model first (see Figure 1A) and found a good fit overall, $\chi^2(14) = 13.68, p > .05$. Parameter estimates showed a significant direct effect of movement towards the ideal on self-authenticity. The additional measures of fit for all models are presented in Table 2. For this model, they supported our idea that partner affirmation may promote movement towards the ideal, which in turn may elicit authenticity.

The first of the two alternative models, shown in Figure 1B, proposed that dispositional authenticity drives each aspect of the Michelangelo phenomenon. While this model provided a sufficient general fit, $\chi^2(12) = 11.52, p > .05$, the critical paths from authenticity to each aspect of the Michelangelo phenomenon were not significant. This finding limited the usefulness of the model in explaining our data. In addition, this model was less parsimonious than the hypothesized model.¹ The second alternative model, shown in Figure 1C, likewise had acceptable fit, $\chi^2(13) = 11.62, p > .05$, but the specified critical paths were not significant, limiting their meaning and the model's overall interpretability. The change in fit did not justify the addition of a path that added to the complexity of a model.

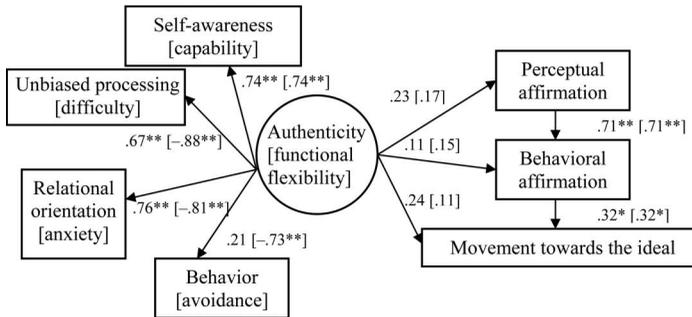
The Michelangelo Phenomenon and Functional Flexibility

Table 1 presents the correlations between each element of the Michelangelo phenomenon and each facet of the FFI (capability, difficulty, anxiety, avoidance). The pattern largely mirrored the expectation that interpersonal affirmation is linked

(A) Hypothesized model



(B) Alternative model 1



(C) Alternative model 2

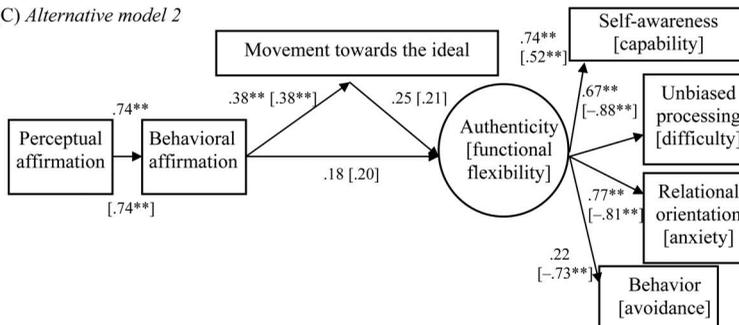


FIGURE 1 (A) Hypothesized model. (B) Alternative model 1. (C) Alternative model 2. Standardized beta weights are presented. Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$. Bracketed values refer to models constructed using functional flexibility.

to authenticity in predictable ways. People who experienced movement towards the ideal tended to report being capable of displaying many sides of themselves. They also tended to experience less anxiety and less difficulty in these situations than those whose partners were not seen as helping them move towards their ideal.

Because functional flexibility provides an alternative conceptualization of authenticity, we again applied SEM and tested our hypothesis that the Michelangelo phenomenon leads to movement towards the ideal, which in turn fosters self-authenticity. Our models and analyses paralleled those conducted on authenticity but used functional flexibility as the dependent latent variable. Again, model merit was based on the statistical measures of overall model fit, parsimony, and the statistical significance of the model's theoretically critical pathways.

The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1A. For this model and all models using functional flexibility, parameter estimates are presented in brackets and

TABLE 2 Additional Measures of Model Fit

	Authenticity			
	CFI	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Hypothesized Model	1.00	0.98, $p > .05$	.000	.996
Alternative Model 1	1.00	0.96, $p > .05$	.000	.996
Alternative Model 2	1.00	0.89, $p > .05$	.000	.997
	Functional flexibility			
	CFI	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Hypothesized Model	1.00	0.89, $p > .05$	.000	.997
Alternative Model 1	0.986	1.24, $p > .05$	.019	.97
Alternative Model 2	0.99	1.16, $p > .05$	.015	.98

Note: CFI = comparative fit index; CMIN/DF = adjusted minimum sample discrepancy; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; PCLOSE = probability of a close fit.

additional measures of fit are shown in Table 2. The hypothesized model fit the empirical data, $\chi^2(14) = 17.59$, $p > .05$, and the critical path from movement towards the ideal to functional flexibility was significant.

The first alternative model, shown in Figure 1B, fit the data, $\chi^2(12) = 14.87$, $p > .05$, but the critical paths from functional flexibility to each step of the Michelangelo phenomenon were not significant. These parameters, as well as its relative complexity, suggest that the hypothesized model offers a better depiction of the data.² The second alternative model, pictured in Figure 1C, reduced parsimony without substantially improving on the hypothesized model's fit, $\chi^2(13) = 15.02$, $p > .05$. The paths from movement towards the ideal and from behavioral affirmation to functional flexibility were not significant, curtailing this model's potential to describe the relation between interpersonal affirmation and self-authenticity.

Relationship Satisfaction, Self-esteem, and Optimism

Because relationship satisfaction was positively associated with each aspect of the Michelangelo phenomenon (see Table 1), of interest was whether the Michelangelo phenomenon was a more reliable predictor of relationship satisfaction than optimism and self-esteem. Such a finding would suggest interpersonal processes are more critical than self-variables for relationship satisfaction. Our findings support this conclusion. Relationship satisfaction was not related to optimism, $r(80) = .05$, but self-esteem and relationship satisfaction were positively associated, $r(79) = .27$, $p < .05$. The simultaneous regression of relationship satisfaction on each element of the Michelangelo phenomenon, self-esteem, and each interaction term ($R^2 = .57$) showed that only behavioral affirmation, $\beta = .72$, $t = 3.99$, $p < .01$, and movement towards the ideal, $\beta = .30$, $t = 2.51$, $p < .05$, independently explained satisfaction. Both perceptual affirmation and self-esteem did not. This result supports the idea that people are satisfied with their relationship when the relationship is affirming, independent of their own dispositional attributes.

While self-esteem did not explain relationship satisfaction, it was related to behavioral affirmation and movement towards the ideal. Table 1 shows this association as well as those between self-esteem and each aspect of authenticity. Based on these positive associations, we regressed each aspect of authenticity on the Michelangelo phenomenon and self-esteem. Only for self-awareness, $R^2 = .47$, $\beta = .47$, $t = 3.75$, $p < .01$, and unbiased processing, $R^2 = .46$, $\beta = .66$, $t = 5.20$, $p < .01$, was self-esteem a significant predictor. Movement towards the ideal dropped from each of these models, $\beta = .02$ and $\beta = -.04$, respectively.

Table 1 shows the associations between self-esteem and the subscales of functional flexibility. For each subscale, we used regression analyses to compare the effects of self-esteem and the Michelangelo processes. For situational capability, only movement towards the ideal was a significant predictor, $R^2 = .13$, $\beta = .24$, $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$, and not self-esteem, $\beta = .10$, $p > .05$. Although the model predicting anxiety revealed an effect of self-esteem, $R^2 = .24$, $\beta = -.46$, $t = -4.13$, $p < .01$, and not movement towards the ideal, $\beta = -.11$, $p > .05$, neither self-esteem nor the Michelangelo phenomenon independently accounted for difficulty or avoidant behaviors.

Discussion

Humanistic ideas are seldom submitted to empirical testing (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). In the current research, we offered a first step towards understanding Rogers's (1961) belief that close relationships contribute to self-growth. We developed a model in the romantic relationship context linking the Michelangelo phenomenon (Drigotas et al., 1999) to self-authenticity. Our results, based on cross-sectional and correlational data, supported Rogers's idea that close relationships foster human flourishing. We found that interpersonal affirmation predicted self-authenticity and used SEM to show the corresponding direction of effect. Given the association between authenticity and psychological well-being (Goldman & Kernis 2002), our findings bring new attention to the role of social relationships in mental health and optimal functioning.

The current study provides support for one possible relation between interpersonal affirmation and self-authenticity, yet it leaves the door open for other explanations. For example, interpersonal affirmation and authenticity may be better characterized as mutually dependent. Suppose Lydia experiences affirmation by her partner and feels a corresponding increase in authenticity. Greater authenticity may help her more fully experience her partner's affirmation. This rewarding cycle (or its negative counterpart) would have important consequences for psychological health and well-being. Consistent with Rogers's (1961) view, a self-reinforcing, sustained helping relationship may foster trust, openness, and unobstructed self-expression.

Our hypothesized model fit the data well save one exception: movement towards the ideal did not predict behavioral authenticity. Likely affecting its poor fit, behavioral authenticity was only weakly related to the other factors of authenticity and had poor internal consistency. Our use of functional flexibility as a second representation of authenticity helped address this problem. Conceptually, functional flexibility nicely parallels the behavioral facet of the AI. Indeed, the FFI asks individuals to evaluate their ability to enact multiple sides of themselves in different situations. The FFI, then, is a subtle and indirect measure of authentic behavioral patterns. Its use as an outcome variable in our model suggests that interpersonal processes are related to self-expression. Because the FFI reflects a defining feature of

psychological well-being (Paulhus & Martin, 1988), our findings underscore the importance of affirming relationships.

In previous research, self-esteem was not related to the Michelangelo phenomenon (Drigotas et al., 1999); however, our results showed a different pattern. Our results showed that self-esteem, not movement towards the ideal, accounted for two facets of authenticity. At the same time, we found that self-esteem failed to account for situational capability, the key facet of functional flexibility. These inconsistent findings warrant further investigation.

On the whole, participants were satisfied with their relationships and this satisfaction was better explained by the dynamic Michelangelo processes than by self-esteem or optimism. This finding has useful implications for psychological health. It suggests that people with low self-esteem or dispositional pessimism are equally as likely as those with high self-esteem or dispositional optimism to experience relationship satisfaction. Feeling satisfied in a romantic relationship can influence one's investment in the relationship, which in turn can affect one's willingness to enact relationship-sustaining behaviors (Rusbult et al., 1998). Thus, relationship satisfaction may be a key factor in helping low-self-esteem people sustain relationships they might otherwise leave. This has clinical implications given the many documented benefits of close, personal relationships. Consistent with this idea, research has shown that investment in a relationship is not related to self-esteem but is related to dyadic adjustment and other positive relationship variables, including whether a relationship will persist or end (Rusbult et al., 1998).

Limitations and Future Directions

Our analyses suggested a unidirectional path from interpersonal affirmation to self-authenticity. Yet, we note that our cross-sectional design does not allow strong causal inferences. We cannot be sure that interpersonal processes caused changes in authenticity; however, we laid the groundwork for future research. A study using a longitudinal design, for example, would allow for inference into how affirmation affects authenticity. Future work should also address our use of self-reports. Behavioral measures or coding couple interactions for affirming behaviors would provide a basis for firmer conclusions.

Finally, our undergraduate sample affected this study's external validity. College students are often engaging in numerous short-term relationships, "trying on" different romantic relationship patterns. Studying an older sample would address this limitation. Presumably, the longer a couple has been together, the more extensive and habitual their interaction patterns. A longitudinal study on established couples could reveal the long-term consequences of partner affirmation (or non-affirmation) on authenticity. It is also possible that the relation between affirmation and authenticity is particularly observable when an established couple attempts something new together. In the same way that shared participation in novel experiences promotes relationship satisfaction (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), a new or challenging activity could provide a context for affirmation and a new sense of authenticity.

Although most of our participants reported experiencing movement towards the ideal as a result of their relationship partners, eight participants (9.52%) reported becoming less close to their ideal selves. Research on the Michelangelo phenomenon suggests these relationships are not likely to last (Drigotas, 2000). Further, based on the current research, the consequences to the self of participating in a non-affirming

relationship are potentially serious. A relationship that fails to provide affirmation may reduce self-authenticity. A person may feel as though she is not thinking, feeling, or behaving in ways consistent with her true self. Instead of acceptance and flexibility, she may feel rigid and remote (Rogers, 1961). The experience of inauthenticity has been described as a sense of alienation or estrangement from one's inner self (Sloan, 2007), a difficult starting point for self-discovery and growth. Clearly, our social relationships have a profound influence on our self and well-being, and the current work adds to our understanding of how interpersonal processes affect self-flourishing.

Notes

1. We also tested a model that included a direct path from dispositional authenticity to perceptual affirmation, the first stage of the Michelangelo phenomenon. This path was not significant, $\beta = .23$, and model fit was slightly worse than the hypothesized model, $\chi^2(14) = 17.38$, $p = .236$; CFI = 0.98; CMIN/DF = 1.24, $p = .236$; RMSEA = .019; PCLOSE = .98.
2. Again, we also tested a variation of this model, which included a direct path from dispositional functional flexibility to perceptual affirmation. This critical path was not significant, $\beta = .17$, $p = .15$, and model fit was slightly worse than the hypothesized model, $\chi^2(14) = 21.49$, $p = .09$; CFI = 0.96; CMIN/DF = 1.54, $p = .09$; RMSEA = .029; PCLOSE = .93.

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