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Parasocial relationships and self-discrepancies: Faux relationships have benefits for low self-esteem individuals

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Abstract

The current research proposes that low self-esteem people can use parasocial relationships to experience movement toward the ideal self, a benefit they may miss in real relationships. In Study 1, low self-esteem undergraduate psychology students at a public university in the United States felt closest to celebrities who were similar to their ideal self. In Study 2, low self-esteem college students primed with their favorite celebrity became more similar to their ideal selves. In Study 3, low self-esteem college students primed with their favorite celebrity, but not a close relationship partner, became more similar to their ideal selves. Results are discussed in terms of the implications for parasocial relationships, self-esteem, and the flexibility of the need to belong.

Fascination with celebrities is a ubiquitous part of our society. Numerous popular television shows and specials are devoted to the life of celebrities, including talk shows where hosts interview celebrities and award shows where celebrities receive honors for their performances. Millions of readers are drawn to tabloids that detail information on marriage, divorce, pregnancy, the birth of children, awards, and the best and worst dressed. Indeed, many people seem to pay a lot of attention to celebrities, watching a lot of television and possibly neglecting aspects of their personal life like "real" relationships or work duties. Yet, the admiration of celebrities is not all bad—in fact, for many people, there may be some important benefits. The current research proposes that "connections" to celebrities (i.e., *parasocial relationships*) can provide a safe route for people who have a difficult time with real interpersonal relationships (i.e., low self-esteem people) to view themselves more positively with very little risk of rejection. Specifically, we propose that parasocial relationships reduce the self-discrepancies of low self-esteem people.

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Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that people establish with media personae, such as show characters, news anchors, talk show hosts, and celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships form as people spend time with the media persona, and a sense of intimacy develops out of "shared" experiences and interactions over time. The media persona becomes predictable, and fans come to believe that they know and understand the media persona. With social attraction (i.e., the media persona could be a friend) and repeated exposure to the persona, the parasocial relationship gains in relational importance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

The experience of empathy may be an important determinant of parasocial relationships. Empathy is an affective reaction produced in response to another person's emotion, specifically a concordant reaction. People generally have to like or identify with someone to experience empathy (Zillman, 2006). In real relationships, empathy is strongly related to relationship closeness (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998, Study 4; Worthen, 1999) and to the strength, intensity, and reward of relational bonds (Norris, 1998). In parasocial interactions, empathic reactions represent the majority of emotional reactions (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Thus, empathy is likely an important determinant of the development of a parasocial relationship.

Parasocial relationships mimic real relationships in several important ways. First, parasocial relationship partners can counteract rejection from a real relationship. Specifically, thinking about a favorite television show or character negates the mood and esteem effects of social rejection (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2007); reduces impairments on cognitive tasks, like analytical reasoning tasks, that exclusion typically causes (Knowles, 2007); and reduces the tendency to inflate in-group meaningfulness, importance, and cohesion due to rejection (Knowles & Gardner, 2007). Second, people tend to respond to their parasocial relationship partners in much the same way that they respond to a real close other. For example, people primed with their favorite character demonstrate a desire to disclose and report more empathy (Knowles, 2007). Furthermore, people with strong attachments to their favorite characters also demonstrate social facilitation effects (Gardner & Knowles, 2007). Specifically, participants with a strong parasocial attachment show facilitation effects on easy tasks and decreased performance on difficult tasks, much as they do in front of a human audience (Gardner & Knowles, 2007). Thus, although people consciously know that parasocial relationships are not real relationships, in many ways they feel psychologically real and meaningful.

Despite these similarities, parasocial relationships are also different from real relationships in that there is little to no face-to-face interaction and, therefore, little to no risk of rejection. Although some people may seek out celebrities through fan clubs or Web sites, the possibility of meeting a particular celebrity is fairly remote (see Giles, 2002). In fact, many fans do not actively seek out their favorite celebrity and even deny the existence of a parasocial relationship. For example, many fans of Princess Diana experienced profound confusion after her death, surprised by the extent of their feelings (Giles, 2002).

The relative safety of parasocial relationships in comparison to real interpersonal relationships has led previous researchers to suggest that people who experience dispositional social deficits should be more likely than people who do not experience those deficits to engage in parasocial relationships in an attempt to establish "safe" social connections (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Putnam, 2000). Despite the intuitive appeal of such theorizing, research linking social deficits with parasocial interaction has failed to provide consistent empirical support (Cohen, 2006). Chronic loneliness (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), neuroticism (Tsao, 1996), and low self-esteem (Tsao, 1996; Turner, 1993) do not reliably predict parasocial interaction.

The fact that people with low self-esteem are not especially likely to form parasocial relationships is perhaps the most surprising finding because the fear of rejection plays a particularly large role in the social deficits they experience. Specifically, low self-esteem people's devaluation of the self exaggerates the threat of rejection from others, leads them to distance themselves from relationship partners, and keeps them from garnering many relationship benefits (e.g., Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Thus, one might suspect that low self-esteem people would be particularly attracted to parasocial relationships (which offer little risk of rejection). Yet, the data do not support that hypothesis (Tsao, 1996). In summary, the appealing hypothesis that people with social deficits are more likely to experience parasocial relationships has not been supported in the literature.

One possible explanation for this lack of empirical support is that past research has primarily examined the tendency to form, maintain, or care about parasocial relationships rather than exploring the consequences of parasocial relationships (e.g., Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin et al., 1985). Perhaps the preponderance of opportunities available in our society to form parasocial bonds (e.g., Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006) and the many different outcomes of those bonds (e.g., Derrick et al., 2007; Knowles, 2007; Knowles & Gardner, 2007) lead many different kinds of people (not just those with social deficits) to form and maintain parasocial bonds. We propose that the relationship between parasocial bonds and social deficits can best be examined by investigating the consequences of parasocial relationships, not their propensity to exist. Therefore, we examined the possible consequences of parasocial relationships for low versus high self-esteem people. We hypothesized that only low self-esteem people use their parasocial relationships to feel closer to their ideals for themselves. Additionally, we propose that low self-esteem people will receive benefits from parasocial relationships that they do not receive from real interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal relationships and self-discrepancies

One benefit of interpersonal relationships is the reduction of self-discrepancies. According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987; see also Markus & Nurius, 1986), most people have goals or ideals for themselves that they strive to attain. In other words, most people have an ideal self that personifies everything they wish they could be. Researchers describe the difference between this ideal self and a person's actual self as an actual–ideal self discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). People who experience this discrepancy to a greater extent than most are more likely to experience dejection-related emotions, such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, or even depression (Higgins, 1987). Yet, relationships can help reduce this tension. Friends can bring people closer to their ideal self, particularly in people who are comfortable being close to others (Gabriel, Carvallo, Jaremka, & Tippin, 2008). This arises through "basking in the reflected glory" of a relationship partner who embodies one's ideals for the self (Cialdini et al., 1976). In other words, people assimilate to the attributes of a relationship partner that are similar to their ideals for the self, leading to a reduction in self-discrepancies. A romantic partner can facilitate similar growth toward one's ideal self (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). In fact, romantically involved people report being significantly closer to their ideal self than romantically uninvolved people (Campbell, Sedikides, & Bosson, 1994).

Given the benefits of relationship partners to self-discrepancies, it is not surprising that people seek out, are attracted to, and get along with people who are similar to their ideal selves (e.g., Herbst, Gaertner, & Insko, 2003; LaPrelle, Hoyle, Insko, & Bernthal, 1990; LaPrelle, Insko, Cooksey, & Graetz, 1991; Mathes & Moore, 2001; Tolmacz, Goldzweig, & Guttman, 2004; Wetzel & Insko, 1982; Wetzel, Schwartz, & Vasu, 1979). Similarity to the ideal self leads to greater liking for and attraction to conversation or work partners (Herbst et al., 2003; LaPrelle et al., 1990; LaPrelle et al., 1991; Wetzel & Insko, 1982), liking of roommates (Wetzel et al., 1979), and attraction to a potential romantic partner (Mathes & Moore, 2001; Tolmacz et al., 2004). Clearly, people's ideal selves play a large role in interpersonal interactions.

People with lower self-esteem are more likely than people with higher self-esteem to be attracted to a person who is similar to their ideal selves (Mathes & Moore, 2001). Additionally, low self-esteem people are particularly likely to have a large actual–ideal discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). Therefore, one might expect that low self-esteem people would be more likely than high self-esteem people to use relationship partners as a means of reducing discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves. Yet, low self-esteem people are ironically unable to attain the self-benefits from their partner that they so desperately need because they are hesitant to risk getting close to their partner.

Low self-esteem and relationship benefits

Deriving benefits for the self from a relationship (platonic or romantic) requires that people risk trusting in and seeking closeness to their partner. For example, enacting pro-relationship behaviors requires a certain amount of satisfaction with the relationship and trust in a partner's caring (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Van Lange et al., 1997). In turn, these same requirements constrain the potential benefits people can receive from relationships. The ability to bask in the reflected glory of another person, rather than making a threatening upward social comparison (e.g., Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988; Wood, 1989), is dependent on closeness to the relationship partner (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002; Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004). Similarly, people only experience self-growth in friendships and romantic relationships when they are comfortable with closeness (Gabriel et al., 2008) and when they experience affirmation and positive regard from their relationship partner (Drigotas et al., 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Unfortunately, low self-esteem people, who need these benefits the most, are less willing than high self-esteem people to risk closeness due to the prospect of rejection (Murray et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2008). Consequently, low self-esteem people are less able than high self-esteem people to receive relationship benefits, such as basking in reflected glory or movement toward the ideal self, because of their fear of rejection.

Parasocial relationships, on the other hand, present little to no threat of rejection. Thus, they provide a context in which low self-esteem people can feel safely connected to others. In the current research, we examined whether low self-esteem people are able to derive some of the benefits from parasocial relationships that they miss out on elsewhere. Rather than suggesting that low self-esteem people are more likely to experience parasocial relationships than high self-esteem people, we hypothesize that low self-esteem people are more likely than high self-esteem people to use parasocial relationships to move closer to the ideal self.

The current studies

To summarize, when people are comfortable with closeness within a specific relationship, they are able to assimilate their partners' positive qualities to the self and thus feel better about the self (Gabriel, Carvallo, Dean, Tippin, & Renaud, 2005; Gabriel et al., 2008). High self-esteem people, who are less afraid of rejection and thus comfortable risking closeness with real relationship partners (Murray et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2008), are able to reduce their self-discrepancies by assimilating real relationship partners. Low self-esteem people, on the other hand, are not as comfortable with closeness in real relationships because they fear rejection. Thus, low self-esteem people lose out on a much needed mechanism for reducing self-discrepancies. The current research hypothesizes that parasocial relationships, which have very low risk of rejection, offer low self-esteem people an opportunity to reduce their self-discrepancies and feel closer to their ideal selves.

We hypothesize that low self-esteem people should view parasocial relationship partners as similar to their ideal selves (Hypothesis 1) and that this similarity to the ideal self should be related to greater empathy with and liking of the parasocial partner (Hypothesis 2). If we find support for the first two hypotheses, then connection to a favorite celebrity should lead to reductions in self-discrepancies for low self-esteem people (i.e., they should feel more similar to their ideal selves) through assimilation of the celebrity to the self (Hypothesis 3). Finally, that effect should also be specific to parasocial relationship partners (i.e., not true for real relationship partners; Hypothesis 4). All the proposed effects should be true for low, but not for high, self-esteem people (who are able to get the same benefits from real relationships and thus do not get them from parasocial relationships). In Study 1, we examined Hypotheses 1 and 2. In Study 2, we examined Hypothesis 3. In Study 3, we examined Hypothesis 4.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the relationship between self-esteem, parasocial relationship closeness, and self-discrepancies. We expected to find that greater perceived similarity between a celebrity and the ideal self would be associated with lower self-esteem, whereas greater perceived similarity between a celebrity and the actual self would be associated with higher self-esteem (Hypothesis 1). We also expected to find that low self-esteem people would empathize with and like celebrities they perceived as similar to their ideal self more than high self-esteem people.

Method

Participants

One hundred undergraduates (53 men and 47 women) participated in exchange for course credit at a large public state university in the northeastern United States.[1] Most participants (78%) were Caucasian. The remainder were predominantly Asian (9%) and African American (7%). The average age of participants was 19 years. One participant did not answer some of the questions, and we dropped that participant from analyses involving those questions. All participants indicated earlier in the semester, in a mass testing session, that they had a celebrity "of [their] same gender who [they] admire, respect, and are interested in." Participants also indicated that they spent at least some time "thinking, reading about, or looking for information about that famous person."

Procedure and materials

Overview. Participation occurred in private cubicles on computers. Participants identified their favorite celebrity and described that celebrity in an open-ended essay for 6 min. We asked participants to describe what that celebrity was like and what they liked about him or her. Next, we assessed similarity of the celebrity to participants' actual self, similarity of the celebrity to their ideal self, and similarity of their actual self to their ideal self. We counterbalanced these measures across participants. Participants then completed several questions about their favorite celebrity, global self-esteem, some questionnaires that are unrelated to the current study, and demographic information. The experimenter then debriefed, thanked, and dismissed participants. We present means, standard deviations, and correlations between each of the measures in Table 1.

Global self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) assessed global self-evaluations (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"). The reliability of the scale (α) was .91. Participants responded to this item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*completely true*). We reverse-scored negative items when computing the total score.

Similarity of celebrity to aspects of self. We assessed participants' actual and ideal selves using a technique adopted from Markus and Nurius (1986). Specifically, we asked participants to list attributes that made up their actual self and their ideal self separately.

After participants described their actual and ideal selves, we assessed their perception of the similarity between the celebrity and their actual and ideal selves. In order to do this, we adapted Aron, Aron, and Smollan's (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale. The measure consisted of seven answer choices, each with two circles arranged like Venn diagrams. Although researchers traditionally use the IOS to measure relationship closeness, we used it to measure similarity of the celebrities to various self-aspects and similarity of the self-aspects to one another. Thus, the circles' labels and the directions were completely different in our adaptation of the IOS than those researchers traditionally have used. In the first of our three adaptations, we labeled one circle "actual self" and the other "celebrity." The circles ranged from barely touching

1. We chose to use a convenience sample in Study 1 because it was exploratory research. We chose to use convenience samples in Study 2 and Study 3 because our experiments involve comparisons between conditions; we are not trying to estimate population means. In all three studies, we believe that studying undergraduate students is justified because pop culture is often marketed toward this age group. Additionally, many celebrities' fan bases are composed primarily of adolescents and emerging adults.

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables in Study 1*

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-esteem[a]	5.59	1.07	—	—				
2. Actual-self/celebrity similarity[a]	3.41	1.46	.43**	—				
3. Ideal-self/celebrity similarity[a]	4.86	1.77	−.08	.43**	—			
4. Actual-self/ideal-self similarity[a]	4.64	1.55	.53**	.46**	.18†	—		
5. Empathy[a]	5.05	1.28	.10	.10	.15	.06	—	
6. Liking[b]	6.10	1.05	.15	.24*	.18+	.10	.58**	—

[a]$n = 100$. [b]$n = 99$.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

(low similarity or low overlap between the actual self and the favorite celebrity) to almost completely overlapping (high similarity or high overlap between the actual self and the favorite celebrity). We asked participants to reflect on what they had written about their actual selves and about their celebrity and indicate which set of circles best represented the similarity between those two. Thus, picking the two nonoverlapping circles would indicate that the celebrity was completely different from the actual self, whereas picking the almost completely overlapping circles would indicate that the celebrity was almost identical to the actual self. We then used the same technique to assess similarity between the ideal self and the celebrity (how similar was their description of their ideal self to their description of the celebrity) and then to assess the similarity between the actual self and the ideal self (how similar was their description of their actual self to their description of their ideal self). Note that in the IOS's traditional use, participants are asked to pick the image that best represents the relationship between the people the circles represent, not their similarity to one another.

Empathy. We asked participants two questions about their feelings of empathy with the celebrity. First, we asked them "How happy are you when something good happens to your favorite celebrity?" (1 = *not at all happy*, 7 = *extremely happy*; $M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.33$). Second, we asked them "How sad are you when something bad happens to your favorite celebrity?" (1 = *not at all sad*, 7 = *extremely sad*; $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.78$). We created a measure of empathy by averaging participants' responses on these two items ($\alpha = .50$). Although the low reliability of this measure is a limitation, it should provide a more conservative test of our hypotheses.[2]

Liking for the celebrity. We asked participants to indicate how much they liked their favorite celebrity. They responded on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Results and discussion

We expected to find that greater perceived similarity between the celebrity and the ideal self would be associated with lower self-esteem (Hypothesis 1). We also expected to find that perceived similarity to the ideal self would predict empathy and liking for low, but not for high, self-esteem people (Hypothesis 2).

Participants' favorite celebrities

All participants described a favorite celebrity of the same gender. We asked participants to focus on same-sex celebrities because past research has demonstrated that people may like celebrities for different reasons (e.g.,

2. We also examined the effects for each item separately. The results were consistent with those presented.

social vs. romantic attraction; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Because we were interested in the effect of favorite celebrities on participants' perceptions of the self, we were more interested in parasocial relationships that arose out of respect and admiration rather than out of physical attraction.

We coded the celebrities participants described for celebrity type. Approximately 30% of celebrities described were movie or television stars, 19% were musicians, 19% were athletes, 12% were political figures, and 18% were other types of celebrities (e.g., talk show hosts, playwrights, CEOs; no more than 5 participants described any of these types). The type of celebrity chosen was not related to self-esteem, $F(1, 4) = 0.30, p > .88$. The effect size, or measure of association, was $\eta_p^2 = .01$.[3]

Similarity of celebrity to aspects of self

Were participants' favorite celebrities those they perceived to be similar to their ideal selves? To answer this question, we examined the degree of similarity reported between the celebrity and both the actual and the ideal selves. Participants reported significantly more similarity between their favorite celebrity and their ideal self ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.77$) than between their favorite celebrity and their actual self ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(99) = 8.32$, $d = .89$, $p < .001$.

We next examined whether perceived similarity to each self-aspect was differentially related to self-esteem. To examine this question, we followed procedures Aiken and West (1991) recommend. We conducted simultaneous regression analyses predicting self-esteem from the centered main effect of actual-self/celebrity similarity, the centered main effect of ideal-self/celebrity similarity, and the Actual-Self/Celebrity Similarity × Ideal-Self/Celebrity Similarity interaction. As predicted, greater ideal-self/celebrity similarity was associated with lower self-esteem, β (the standardized regression coefficient) $= -.35$, $sr^2 = .08$, $t(96) = -3.27$, $p = .001$. Conversely, greater actual-self/celebrity similarity was associated with higher self-esteem, $\beta = .59$, $sr^2 = .25$, $t(96) = 5.77$, $p < .001$. The two-way interaction was not significant, $\beta = -.06$, $sr^2 < .01$, $t(96) = -0.57$, $p = .57$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. As predicted, greater similarity between the celebrity and the ideal self was associated with lower self-esteem. Conversely, greater similarity between the celebrity and the actual self was associated with higher self-esteem.

Empathy

Would low self-esteem people empathize more with celebrities who they perceived to be more similar to their ideal self? Would this relationship also be apparent for high self-esteem people? To examine these questions, we conducted simultaneous regression analyses predicting empathy from the centered main effect of ideal-self/celebrity similarity, the centered main effect of self-esteem, and the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction. We entered actual-self/celebrity similarity and actual-self/ideal-self similarity as covariates. Neither covariate significantly predicted empathy, both ps $> .74$. As expected, the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction predicting empathy was significant, $\beta = -.27$, $sr^2 = .06$, $t(94) = -2.58$, $p = .01$.

We decomposed this interaction into the two component sets of simple effects. In the first set of analyses, we examined the simple effect of ideal-self/celebrity similarity for low- and high self-esteem participants (i.e., 1 *SD* below and above the mean, respectively). As Figure 1 illustrates, low self-esteem participants reported greater empathy for the celebrity the more similar the celebrity was to their ideal self, $\beta = .34$, $sr^2 = .06$, $t(94) = 2.57$, $p = .01$. This simple effect was not significant for high self-esteem participants, $\beta = -.14$, $sr^2 = .01$, $t(94) = -0.83$, $p = .41$. In the second set of analyses, we examined the simple effect of self-esteem for low and high ideal-self/celebrity similarity (i.e., 1 *SD* below and above the mean, respectively). As Figure 1 illustrates, participants low in ideal-self/celebrity similarity reported greater empathy for the

3. The type of celebrity chosen did not moderate any of the effects in any of the three studies. Accordingly, we collapse across celebrity type in presenting our results for all three studies.

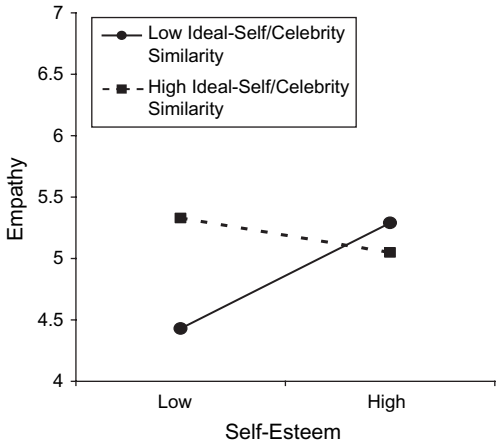

Figure 1. Empathy for the favorite celebrity as a function of self-esteem and ideal-self/celebrity similarity in Study 1.

celebrity the higher their self-esteem, $\beta = .31$, $sr^2 = .05$, $t(94) = 2.18$, $p = .03$. This simple effect was not significant for participants high in ideal-self/celebrity similarity, $\beta = -.17$, $sr^2 = .01$, $t(94) = -0.95$, $p = .34$. Therefore, we found support for the first part of Hypothesis 2; low self-esteem people felt greater empathy for the celebrity the more similar their perceptions of the celebrity were to their ideal self. High self-esteem people did not show this association.

Although we did not predict a relationship between perceived similarity of the celebrity to the actual self and empathy, we also examined that possibility. Specifically, we conducted simultaneous regression analyses predicting empathy from the centered main effect of actual-self/celebrity similarity, the centered main effect of self-esteem, and the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction. We entered ideal-self/celebrity similarity and actual-self/ideal-self similarity as covariates. None of these variables significantly predicted empathy, all ps $> .13$.

Liking for the celebrity

Would low self-esteem people like celebrities more if they perceived the celebrities to be more similar to their ideal self? Would this relationship be apparent for high self-esteem people? To examine these questions, we again conducted simultaneous regression analyses predicting liking from the centered main effect of ideal-self/celebrity similarity, the centered main effect of self-esteem, and the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction. We entered actual-self/celebrity similarity and actual-self/ideal-self similarity as covariates. Actual-self/celebrity similarity was a marginally significant predictor of liking, $\beta = .23$, $sr^2 = .03$, $t(93) = 1.81$, $p = .07$, but actual-self/ideal-self similarity was not, $p > .79$. As expected, the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction predicting liking of the celebrity was significant, $\beta = -.29$, $sr^2 = .07$, $t(93) = -2.83$, $p < .01$.

We decomposed this interaction into the two component sets of simple effects. In the first set of analyses, we examined the simple effect of ideal-self/celebrity similarity for low and high self-esteem participants. As Figure 2 illustrates, low self-esteem participants reported greater liking for their favorite celebrity the more similar their ideal self was to the celebrity, $\beta = .29$, $sr^2 = .05$, $t(93) = 2.31$, $p = .02$. This simple effect was not significant for high self-esteem participants, $\beta = -.22$, $sr^2 = .02$, $t(93) = -1.31$, $p = .19$. In the second set of analyses, we examined the simple effect of self-esteem for low and high ideal-self/celebrity similarity. As Figure 2 illustrates, participants low in ideal-self/celebrity similarity reported greater liking for their favorite celebrity the

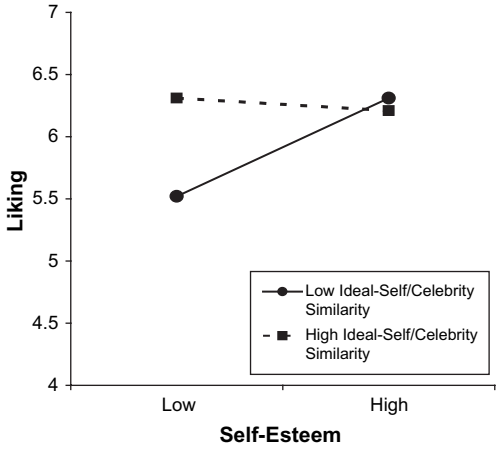

Figure 2. Liking for the favorite celebrity as a function of self-esteem and ideal-self/celebrity similarity in Study 1.

higher their self-esteem, $\beta = .30$, $sr^2 = .04$, $t(94) = 2.12$, $p = .04$. This simple effect was not significant for participants high in ideal-self/celebrity similarity, $\beta = -.22$, $sr^2 = .02$, $t(94) = -1.29$, $p = .20$. Therefore, we found support for the second part of Hypothesis 2; low self-esteem people showed more liking for the celebrity the more similar their perceptions of the celebrity were to their ideal self. High self-esteem people did not show this association.

Although we did not predict a relationship between perceived similarity of the celebrity to the actual self and liking, we also examined that possibility. Specifically, we conducted simultaneous regression analyses predicting liking from the centered main effect of actual-self/celebrity similarity, the centered main effect of self-esteem, and the Self-Esteem × Similarity interaction. We entered ideal-self/celebrity similarity and actual-self/ideal-self similarity as covariates. None of these variables significantly predicted liking, all ps $> .15$.

Alternative explanations

In one sense, it may seem that some of the results from Study 1 are completely unsurprising. Greater perceived similarity between the celebrity and the ideal self was associated with lower self-esteem, whereas greater perceived similarity between the celebrity and the actual self was associated with higher self-esteem. Given that low self-esteem people have a particularly large discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self (Higgins, 1987), and given that low self-esteem people are more likely than high self-esteem people to be attracted to someone who resembles their ideal self (Mathes & Moore, 2001), this finding might appear to be a simple self-discrepancy effect. To demonstrate that this effect was not simply due to the relatively greater similarity between the actual self and the ideal self of high self-esteem people compared to low self-esteem people, we reran the analysis including actual-self/ideal-self similarity as a covariate. Unsurprisingly, actual-self/ideal-self similarity was positively related to self-esteem, $\beta = .44$, $sr^2 = .15$, $t(95) = 4.91$, $p < .001$. Yet, the two effects of interest were still significant. Greater ideal-self/celebrity similarity was associated with lower self-esteem, $\beta = -.39$, $sr^2 = .10$, $t(95) = -3.96$, $p < .001$. Conversely, greater actual-self/celebrity similarity was associated with higher self-esteem, $\beta = .42$, $sr^2 = .11$, $t(95) = 4.22$, $p < .001$. These results demonstrate that the observed effects are not simply a by-product of the relationship between self-esteem and level of self-discrepancy but, rather, a novel extension of prior research.

Study 2

In Study 1, we found that greater perceived similarity between the celebrity and the ideal self was associated with lower self-esteem, supporting Hypothesis 1. We also found that low self-esteem people empathized with and liked their favorite celebrities more when they perceived them to be more similar to their ideal self, supporting Hypothesis 2. This relationship was not apparent for high self-esteem people. Yet, Study 1 did not directly address the benefits that people may gain from parasocial relationships. We conducted Study 2 to examine whether parasocial relationships can actually reduce self-discrepancies. Because low self-esteem people perceive their favorite celebrities to be similar to their ideal self, we expected to find that thinking about a favorite celebrity would make low self-esteem people feel more similar to their ideal self through assimilation. Specifically, thinking about a favorite celebrity should make low self-esteem people feel more similar to their favorite celebrity, thereby increasing the similarity between their actual self and ideal self. We did not expect this effect for high self-esteem people because high self-esteem people's favorite celebrities are not uniquely similar to their ideal selves.

Method

Participants

One hundred sixty-eight undergraduates (78 men and 90 women) participated in exchange for course credit at a large public state university in the Northeastern United States. Most participants (62%) were Caucasian. The

Table 2. *Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables in Study 2*

			Experimental		Control	
Variable	1	2	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1. Actual-self/ideal-self similarity	—		4.69	1.68	4.65	1.52
2. Mood	−.24**	—	2.83	2.83	2.98	0.97

Note. $n = 168$.
**$p < .001$.

remainder was predominantly Asian (18%) and African American (10%). The average age of participants was 19 years. We randomly assigned participants to experimental condition (experimental vs. control).

Procedures and materials

Overview. All participants indicated earlier in the semester, using the same questions as Study 1, that they had a same-sex celebrity who they admired. In addition, participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) measure of self-esteem at a large testing session early in the semester. On the basis of their scores on this measure, the mass testing researchers categorized them as low or high self-esteem people and gave us the data. We invited an even number of low and high self-esteem students to participate in a study on celebrities. Of the students who actually participated in our study, 75 of them fell in the range the mass testing researchers categorized as low self-esteem people and 93 of them fell in the range the mass testing researchers categorized as high self-esteem people. (Because of procedures for using mass testing data at that time at our university, we were not able to match participants in our experiments with their scores on the Rosenberg measure of self-esteem. We were only able to classify them as either "low" or "high.")

As in Study 1, participation occurred in private cubicles on computers. To activate thoughts of the admired celebrity, participants in the experimental condition wrote about their favorite celebrity for 6 min. We asked them to describe what the celebrity was like and what the participants liked about him or her. Participants in the control condition wrote about Regis Philbin for 6 min.[4] Next, all participants completed the actual-self/ideal-self similarity variation of the IOS reported in Study 1 to determine how much similarity they perceived between their actual and ideal selves. Participants also completed a measure of mood. Finally, the experimenter probed for suspicion and debriefed, thanked, and dismissed the participants. We present means and standard deviations by experimental group and correlations between the measures in Table 2.

Mood. Participants completed an 11-item subset of the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; $\alpha = .85$). We asked them to describe how much they felt each emotion (e.g., happy, sad) on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). We reverse-scored negative items when we computed the overall measure.

Results and discussion

Eighty-three participants completed the experimental condition, in which they described their favorite celebrity. The remaining 85 participants completed the control condition, in which they described Regis Philbin.

Participants' favorite celebrities

As in Study 1, all participants listed a favorite celebrity of their same gender. We coded celebrity names for celebrity type. Approximately 27% of celebrities listed were musicians, 20% were movie or television stars, 20% were

4. A pretest of 14 undergraduates rating a large number of celebrities on familiarity and liking revealed that all were familiar with Regis Philbin but none had strong positive or negative feelings about him.

athletes, 8% were political figures, and 24% were other types of celebrities. The type of celebrity chosen did not differ by self-esteem, $\chi^2(4) = 4.31$, $p = .37$, or across experimental group, $\chi^2(4) = 1.33$, $p = .86$. The effect size, or measure of association, for each analysis was $\varphi = .16$ and $\varphi = .09$, respectively.

Similarity between the actual self and the ideal self

Did low self-esteem people show more similarity between the actual self and the ideal self in the experimental condition than in the control condition? Would this difference also be apparent for high self-esteem people? To answer these questions, we examined actual-self/ideal-self similarity in a 2 (condition: experimental vs. control) × 2 (self-esteem: low vs. high) analysis of variance (ANOVA). As predicted, a significant interaction emerged between condition and self-esteem, $F(1, 164) = 4.31$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $p = .04$ (see Figure 3). Planned comparisons revealed that low self-esteem people reported more actual-self/ideal-self similarity in the experimental condition than in the control condition, $t(164) = 2.05$, $d = .32$, $p = .04$. High self-esteem people did not differ between conditions, $t(164) = 0.79$, $d = .12$, $p = .43$. Additionally, although high self-esteem people showed significantly greater actual-self/ideal-self similarity than low self-esteem people in the control condition, $t(164) = 3.93$, $d = .61$, $p < .001$, this difference was no longer significant in the experimental condition, $t(164) = 1.04$, $d = .16$, $p = .30$. Therefore, we found support for Hypothesis 3; low self-esteem people who thought about their favorite celebrity showed greater similarity between their actual self and ideal self than low self-esteem people in the control condition.

Alternative explanations

We interpret our results to mean that low self-esteem people experienced movement toward their ideal self through their connection to a favorite celebrity. Nevertheless, at least three possible alternative explanations exist. First, it is possible that writing about the favorite celebrity in the experimental condition was simply more fun and interesting than writing about Regis Philbin in the control condition. To examine that hypothesis, we examined the mood of participants. Participants actually showed somewhat *lower* (not higher) mood in the experimental condition than in the control condition, $t(166) = -0.96$, $d = .15$, $p = .12$, and when we entered mood as a covariate, the interaction was still significant, $F(1, 163) = 5.24$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $p = .02$. Thus, mood was not related to the findings.

We were unable to address two other alternative hypotheses with data from Study 2; therefore, we addressed them in Study 3.

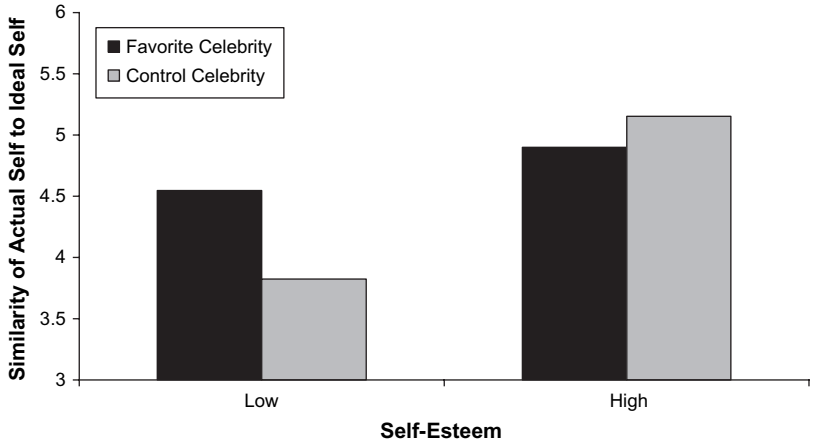

Figure 3. Similarity of the actual self to the ideal self as a function of condition and self-esteem in Study 2.

First, we hypothesized that the reduction in self-discrepancies low self-esteem people experienced was the result of assimilating the celebrity to the actual self and thus shifting the actual self to be more similar to the ideal self. Yet, it is possible that, rather than changing their actual selves, low self-esteem people actually "lower" their ideal self to be closer to their actual self, thus creating greater similarity. For example, contemplating someone famous but without any apparent talents (e.g., Paris Hilton) may allow low self-esteem people to feel that they do not need very high aspirations in order to succeed. With the measure of actual-self/ideal-self similarity used, we are unable to completely rule out this possibility. Therefore, Study 3 directly assessed the proposed mediational model. We measured similarity of the celebrity to the actual self, and we tested its role as a mediator of the reduction in self-discrepancy.

Second, it is possible that writing about the favorite celebrity in the experimental condition was more of a self-affirmation than writing about Regis Philbin. Therefore, our findings could simply be an artifact of improved state self-esteem. Unfortunately, we did not include a measure of state self-esteem in this study and are therefore unable to rule out this possibility. We include a measure of state self-esteem in Study 3.

Study 3

We designed Study 3 to examine whether the benefits low self-esteem people garner from celebrities in Study 2 are indeed unique to parasocial relationships. Recall that we hypothesized that parasocial relationships would be particularly useful to low self-esteem people because they would provide a benefit to the self (movement toward the ideal self) that low self-esteem people do not receive in real relationships. Although a large body of research demonstrates that low self-esteem people do not receive many benefits of real relationships (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Murray et al., 1996), to our knowledge, no study has directly examined whether low self-esteem people are able to move toward their ideal selves by thinking about actual relationship partners. Thus, the main goals of Study 3 were to replicate the reduction in self-discrepancy observed in Study 2 and to demonstrate that it is unique to parasocial relationships. In addition, Study 3 addresses alternative explanations for the results of Study 2 and demonstrates the proposed mediational path.

We accomplished these goals in the following manner. First, we used the exact conditions from Study 2, the celebrity condition and the control condition, and the same dependent measure, actual-self/ideal-self similarity, in the current study to replicate the observed findings for low self-esteem people in Study 2. We added a further condition, a close relationship partner condition, to determine whether the effect we observed in Study 2 was unique to parasocial relationships. We also added a further dependent measure, actual-self/celebrity similarity, to test mediation. Additionally, because we were primarily interested in the effects for low self-esteem people, we preselected for low self-esteem people in the current study.

Method

Participants

Eighty undergraduates (29 men and 51 women) participated in exchange for course credit at a large public state university in the Northeastern United States. Most participants (61%) were Caucasian. The remainder were predominantly Asian (28%) and African American (6%). The average age of participants was 19 years. We randomly assigned participants to experimental condition (celebrity, close relationship partner, or control). Forty-five percent of participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship. The likelihood of being in a romantic relationship did not differ across conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 1.22$, $\varphi = .12$, $p = .54$.[5]

5. Whether or not participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship did not moderate any of the effects in Study 3. Accordingly, we collapse across relationship type (romantic relationship vs. close friendship) in presenting our results.

Procedures and materials

Overview. All participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) measure of self-esteem at a large testing session early in the semester. On the basis of their scores on this measure, we conducted a median split to categorize students into those with relatively lower and higher self-esteem. We contacted students with lower self-esteem by e-mail and invited them to participate in the study if there was a particular celebrity they admired and about whom they regularly sought information. The self-esteem scores for those students who actually participated in our study averaged 4.43 ($SD = 0.60$) on a 7-point scale.

As in the previous studies, participation occurred in private cubicles on computers. Participants in the celebrity condition wrote about their favorite celebrity for 6 min, as in Study 2. Participants in the control condition wrote about Regis Philbin for 6 min, as in Study 2. Participants in the close relationship partner condition wrote about a close relationship partner for 6 min. We asked participants who were in a romantic relationship to describe their romantic partner. We asked them to do this because we were interested in comparing parasocial relationships to close relationships, and most previous work on close relationships has focused on romantic relationships. We asked participants who were not in a romantic relationship to describe a close friend. Next, all participants completed the actual-self/ideal-self similarity variation of the IOS reported in the previous studies to determine how much similarity they perceived between their actual and ideal selves. They also completed the actual-self/celebrity similarity variation completed in Study 1 and a measure of state self-esteem. Finally, the experimenter probed for suspicion and debriefed, thanked, and dismissed the participants. We present means and standard deviations by experimental group and correlations between the measures in Table 3.

State self-esteem. Participants completed the Heatherton and Polivy (1991) measure of state self-esteem ($\alpha = .87$). In this measure, participants indicated their agreement with each of 20 statements (e.g., "I feel confident about my abilities") on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). We reverse-scored negative items when computing the total score.

Results

Twenty-seven participants completed the celebrity condition, 27 participants completed the close relationship partner condition, and 26 participants completed the control condition, in which they described Regis Philbin.

Participants' favorite celebrity

As in the previous studies, all participants listed a favorite celebrity of their same gender. We coded celebrity names for celebrity type. Approximately 56% of celebrities listed were primarily movie stars, 16% were primarily television stars, 19% were musicians, 4% were athletes, and 5% were other types of celebrities. The type of celebrity chosen did not differ across experimental group, $\chi^2(8) = 7.44$, $\varphi = .31$, $p = .49$.

Table 3. *Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables in Study 3*

				Celebrity		Close relationship		Control	
Variable	1	2	3	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1. Actual-self/ideal-self similarity	—			4.70	1.41	3.81	0.96	3.81	1.50
2. Actual-self/celebrity similarity	.54**	—		3.33	1.59	2.56	0.89	2.19	1.36
3. State self-esteem	−.39**	−.18	—	2.97	0.63	3.03	0.51	2.95	0.51

Note. $n = 80$.
**$p < .001$.

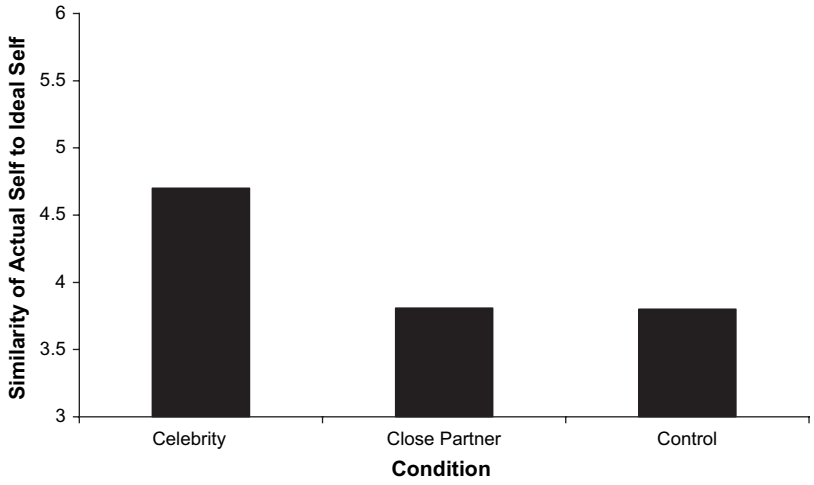

Figure 4. Similarity of the actual self to the ideal self as a function of condition in Study 3.

Similarity between the actual self and the ideal self

Did low self-esteem people show more similarity between their actual self and ideal self in the celebrity condition than in the other two conditions? To answer that question, we examined actual-self/ideal-self similarity in a one-factor ANOVA with three levels. As predicted, we found a significant main effect of condition, $F(2, 77) = 4.16$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, $p = .02$ (see Figure 4). Scheffé tests ($\alpha = .05$) revealed that participants in the celebrity condition reported significantly more similarity between their actual and ideal selves than participants in the close relationship partner condition or in the control condition, which did not differ. Therefore, we found support for Hypothesis 4: The increase in similarity between the actual self and the ideal self was unique to the celebrity prime. Thinking about a close relationship partner did not have the same beneficial effect for low self-esteem people.

Alternate hypotheses

Study 3 also aimed to address two alternative explanations for Study 2. First, although we hypothesized that the decrease in self-discrepancy was due to assimilation of the celebrity to the actual self, it could also have been due to the lowering of ideals for the self. To examine this possibility, we tested actual-self/celebrity similarity as a mediator. If actual-self/celebrity similarity mediates the relationship between condition and actual-self/ideal-self similarity, it would suggest that participants' actual selves became more similar to their ideal selves because their actual selves became more similar to their perceptions of their favorite celebrity.

We used Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step procedure to test for mediation.[6] In the first step, the independent variable, condition, should have a significant effect on the outcome, actual-self/ideal-self similarity (as it did). In the second step, condition should have a significant effect on the mediator, actual-self/celebrity similarity. In the third step, the mediator, actual-self/celebrity similarity, should have a significant effect on the outcome, actual-self/ideal-self similarity, controlling for condition. In the fourth step, condition should no longer have a significant effect on the outcome, actual-self/ideal-self similarity, when controlling for the mediator, actual-self/celebrity similarity.

Accordingly, we conducted an ANOVA to test Step 2. As predicted, we found a significant main effect of condition on actual-self/celebrity similarity, $F(2, 77) = 5.25$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, $p < .01$. Scheffé tests revealed that

6. We also tested mediation using a bootstrapping method Preacher and Hayes (2004) recommend. The results were consistent with those presented.

participants in the celebrity condition reported more similarity between their actual self and their favorite celebrity than participants in the close relationship partner condition ($p < .10$) or in the control condition ($p < .01$), which did not differ. Thus, Step 2 in the test of mediation was supported.

Accordingly, we conducted an analysis of covariance with condition as a random factor and actual-self/celebrity similarity as a covariate to test Steps 3 and 4. As predicted, the effect of actual-self/celebrity similarity on actual-self/ideal-self similarity was significant, $F(3, 76) = 24.62$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$, $p < .001$. When controlling for actual-self/celebrity similarity, the effect of condition on actual-self/ideal-self similarity was no longer significant, $F(3, 76) = 1.26$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $p = .29$. Thus, the mediational model was supported; actual-self/celebrity similarity mediated the relationship between condition and actual-self/ideal-self similarity. Specifically, low self-esteem people became closer to their ideal selves because they assimilated celebrities they perceived as embodying their ideal selves to their actual selves.

The second alternative explanation is that writing about the favorite celebrity in the experimental condition functions as a self-affirmation and thus improves feelings about the self, which reduces self-discrepancies. In other words, the current findings could be an artifact of improved state self-esteem. If so, one would expect participants in the celebrity condition to have higher state self-esteem and for state self-esteem to mediate the findings. Yet, there was no significant difference in state self-esteem between groups, $F(2, 79) = 0.19$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .83$, and the interaction still had a significant effect on actual-self/ideal-self similarity when controlling for state self-esteem, $F(2, 76) = 4.73$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, $p = .01$, indicating that state self-esteem did not mediate the effect and ruling out this alternative.

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the main findings of Study 2; participants low in self-esteem had smaller self-discrepancies after thinking about their favorite celebrity as compared to those in the control condition (who described Regis Philbin). In addition, Study 3 demonstrated that, as work by Murray and colleagues (Murray et al., 1996, 2000; Murray et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2002; Murray et al., 2008) would suggest, relationship partners do not reduce self-discrepancies for low self-esteem people (as they do for people who are comfortable with closeness; Gabriel et al., 2008). In other words, the reductions in self-discrepancies for low self-esteem people are specific to parasocial relationships. Study 3 also established that perceived similarity of the celebrity to the self mediated the reduction in self-discrepancies. In other words, as predicted, low self-esteem people reduced self-discrepancies by assimilating favorite celebrities to the self. Finally, in Study 3, we addressed and discarded alternative explanations such as self-affirmation.

General Discussion

In the current research, we examined how admired celebrities reduce self-discrepancies for low self-esteem people. Based on previous research demonstrating that real interpersonal relationships can be rewarding and affirming, we hypothesized that parasocial relationships with celebrities may also be affirming, particularly for low self-esteem people. We expected to find that low self-esteem people would like and empathize (i.e., have closer parasocial relationships) with celebrities who they perceived to be similar to their ideal selves more than those who they perceived to be less similar and that they would experience benefits to the self through the connection they feel to that celebrity. We also expected that these benefits would be unique to parasocial relationships; in other words, we did not expect low self-esteem people to receive the same benefits from real close relationships. We found support for these hypotheses. In Study 1, as expected, low self-esteem people saw their favorite celebrities as very similar to their ideal selves. The more perceived similarity there was between the celebrity and the ideal self, the more low self-esteem people liked and empathized with that celebrity. In Study 2, low self-esteem people primed with their favorite celebrity felt more similar to their ideal selves than low self-esteem people

primed with a control celebrity. In Study 3, low self-esteem people primed with their favorite celebrity felt more similar to their ideal selves than low self-esteem people primed with a close relationship partner or a control celebrity. In addition, assimilation of the celebrity to the self mediated the effect; thinking about their favorite celebrities made participants feel more similar to those celebrities that, in turn, made them feel more similar to their ideal selves. In summary, the current research demonstrates that parasocial relationships can have self-enhancing benefits for low self-esteem people that they do not receive in real relationships.

Celebrities and the need to belong

Our findings have important implications for the study of interpersonal relations and belonging. Previous research has clearly demonstrated the importance of belonging (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Gruenewald, Kemeny, Aziz, & Fahey, 2004; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002, 2003; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). The current studies add to this literature by demonstrating the ubiquity of fulfilling the need to belong. Even "fake" relationships with celebrities, relationships without any actual contact, can have benefits for the self. This supports a view of the need to belong as pervasive and powerful.

Yet, who is to judge what makes a relationship "real" or "fake"? The need to belong is likely an evolutionary adaptation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Yet, our ancestors were not exposed to television or the mass media and, therefore, could not develop adaptations for differentiating between real and fake people (Kanazawa, 2002) or, for that matter, real and fake relationships. This suggests that, even though parasocial relationships are not real insofar as the two individuals involved actually know one another and interact, the psychological effects of them could be quite real. Indeed, the current research suggests just that.

What are the potential practical implications of our research findings? It is possible that people may experience other benefits and difficulties of real relationships through parasocial relationships as well. For example, people could derive a sense of belonging merely from repeated, nonaversive "contact" with their favorite celebrity (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People could also use celebrities to activate personal goals (e.g., Fitzsimons, Shah, Chartrand, & Bargh, 2005). Research has already demonstrated that parasocial interaction can affect perceptions of the self (Annese, 2004), attitudes toward others (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006), and behavior (Rubin & Step, 2000). Antisocial behaviors and attitudes may also be learned from celebrities. For example, previous research has demonstrated that children may learn violence from television (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Belson, 1978; Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Eron, 1987; Eron & Huesmann, 1980; Muson, 1978), an effect potentially caused by modeling a favorite celebrity or television show character (i.e., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). It is likely that interest in celebrities is multifaceted and can thus serve multiple psychological functions. In fact, if some of these other purposes were examined, we might have a better understanding of the purposes for which high self-esteem people use parasocial relationships.

Can parasocial relationships compare to the real thing?

Previous research demonstrates that parasocial relationships are psychologically real to the people experiencing them (e.g., Derrick et al., 2007; Gardner & Knowles, 2007; Knowles, 2007; Knowles & Gardner, 2007). In addition, the current studies found that parasocial relationships can sometimes have benefits that real relationships do not. Does this mean that parasocial relationships are "as good as" real interpersonal relationships? In other words, if people have a difficult time in real relationships, can they turn to parasocial relationships for all the social needs they are missing? We do not believe this is the case. Although parasocial relationships do appear to buffer against rejection (Derrick et al., 2007; Knowles, 2007; Knowles & Gardner, 2007)

and provide benefits like growth toward the ideal self, they likely do not do so as well as real interpersonal relationships. Thus, although low self-esteem people can use parasocial relationships to gain some of the benefits they may miss in real interpersonal relationships, they are likely still not receiving as many relationship benefits as high self-esteem people. We believe that parasocial relationships are best considered as complementary to real relationships—people experiencing solely parasocial relationships are better off than if they had no relationships at all, but they are likely not as well off as people who also experience real interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless, we do not believe people must choose between real and parasocial relationships. It is entirely possible that people who experience parasocial relationships have social networks as large as people who do not experience parasocial relationships. In fact, previous research has demonstrated that the likelihood of experiencing a parasocial relationship is positively related to social skills (Turner, 1993) and the perceived size of one's social network (Kanazawa, 2002). Thus, we are not arguing that parasocial relationships replace real relationships.

It is also possible that parasocial relationships may create relationship standards that are too difficult to live up to in real relationships, thereby creating additional relationship difficulties. For example, if a woman sees a husband in a television show constantly showering his wife with attention and her own husband spends relatively more time on other necessary pursuits, like work, chores, and child care, she may come to feel neglected and unloved. Despite the fact that her husband does care very deeply for her, she may come to expect an unrealistic amount of attention, given the limited number of hours in a day and the unrealistic portrayal in a television show. Future research should examine the potential negative consequences of parasocial relationships, as well as the positive.

Future directions

The present research examined a specific kind of parasocial relationship: one with a celebrity of the same gender who participants liked and admired. An interesting direction for future research would be to look at how parasocial relationships with other celebrities may differ in function. For example, we looked at same-sex celebrities because we were interested in parasocial bonds that were formed because of social, not physical, attraction (e.g., Rubin & McHugh, 1987). It is possible, even probable, that we would have found different results if we had examined this other type of connection. (As one of our female research assistants pointed out during the initial planning stages of this research, "My feelings for Brad Pitt have nothing to do with my ideal self!") In addition, some people may also be drawn to celebrities they do not like but instead to whom they feel superior. For example, people may be attracted to tabloids to learn of celebrity misfortunes, such as extramarital affairs, divorces, drug problems, legal problems, and the loss of awards. Stories of celebrity problems may lead to Schadenfreude. If we had examined reasons for peoples' interest in celebrities to whom they felt superior, rather than interest in celebrities they admire, we may very well have found contrast, instead of assimilation, effects. We may also have found effects for high, rather than for low, self-esteem people. Future research is necessary to examine those possibilities.

It would also be useful if future research examined whether low self-esteem people are particularly attracted to people who embody their ideals for themselves or whether they tend to view celebrities they are already attracted to as being similar to their ideals. For example, does a fan like Julia Roberts because she is funny and kind (the very traits the fan wishes to have) or does the fan project the traits of funny and kind on Julia Roberts because the fan wishes to have those traits? We expect that the causal role of these constructs is likely complicated, and they probably influence each other in some type of reciprocal fashion.

Additionally, in this particular set of studies, we were interested in whether low self-esteem people could become closer to their ideal self (whatever that ideal self was) through assimilation to a favorite celebrity. The measure of perceived similarity we used was a global measure, reflecting this fact. It is

possible that each participant assimilated to a different characteristic, like warmth, intelligence, humor, or musical or athletic talent. Such a detailed analysis of idiosyncratic ideal selves and favorite celebrities falls outside the purview of the current research, but we think that examining these issues at the ideographic level would be a very interesting and important area for future research.

Finally, one important limitation of the current research requires attention. We used convenience samples of students from a university in the United States in the current studies. Additional replications are needed to determine whether these findings are generally applicable to college students and to determine whether these effects are in fact generalizable to other populations. Do older adults and children also experience these effects? Do people from countries other than the United States? Additional research should examine the boundary conditions of these effects.

Conclusion: parasocial relationships in the real world?

> Michael Jackson has given so much to the world. He is music, and it's not possible that he is guilty, regardless of what the jury says. He will always be a star to us. —B. J. Hickman (Olsen, 2005)

In December 2003, Michael Jackson was formally charged with child molestation. The negativity surrounding the case was strong, yet many of Jackson's fans remained loyal, standing outside the courtroom for the duration of his trial. One woman even released a white dove for each not-guilty verdict (Booth, 2005; "Michael Jackson cleared," 2005; "Michael Jackson formally charged," 2003). To some, the devotion of Jackson's fans (and fans of other celebrities) may seem strange or even fanatical. Yet, research demonstrates that established psychological theories and processes can and should be used to explain this widespread cultural phenomenon (e.g., Giles, 2002). In fact, focusing on a celebrity like Michael Jackson may not be a bad thing; such celebrity devotion might even be beneficial for someone with low self-esteem, making him or her feel more creative, talented, and successful. Thus, the current research demonstrates that, contrary to lay opinion, parasocial relationships, celebrity worship, and television viewing may actually have a positive influence on some people. Specifically, through parasocial relationships, low self-esteem people can gain some of the benefits of real relationships without the fear of rejection.

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