SPECIAL ISSUE

Complementing the Sculpting Metaphor: Reflections on How Relationship Partners Elicit the Best or the Worst in Each Other

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A major idea in relationship science is that partners in a close relationship can "sculpt" each other in a manner that helps them align more closely with their ideal, or true, self. This sculpting metaphor is compelling, elegant, and generative, but it also possesses previously unrecognized liabilities, especially in its conceptualization of the ideal self as a sculpture yearning for release from a block of stone that is imprisoning it. Given the powerful role that metaphors play in structuring thought, overreliance on the sculpting metaphor has blinded us to certain questions even as it has sensitized us to others. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which relationship partners bring out the best or the worst in each other, we must complement the sculpting metaphor with metaphors that direct our attention to questions that it obscures, such as (a) where the ideal self comes from and (b) whether, how much, and how the ideal self changes over time.

Keywords: Michelangelo phenomenon, ideal self, authenticity, metaphor

Living with him, she had come to believe that men and women are given, or seek unawares, the experience they require. . . . She thought often about Michelangelo's statues that they had seen years ago in Florence in the first excitement of their love, figures hidden in the block of stone, uncovered only by the artist's chipping away the excess, the superficial blur, till smooth and spare, the ideal shape was revealed. She and Ivan were hammer and chisel to each other.
—Lynn Sharon Schwartz, *Rough Strife* (1980)

The social psychologist Caryl Rusbult read Schwartz's (1980) novel while traveling in Italy in the 1980s and made note of this hammer-and-chisel passage. In the 1990s, when her doctoral student Stephen Drigotas expressed a desire to redress the overemphasis in relationships research on negative processes by investigating positive processes in his own work, Rusbult recalled this passage, and the two of them launched an influential program of research on an interpersonal process through which close relationship partners can help each other grow toward their ideal self over time. They called this process the *Michelangelo phenomenon* (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999).

Michelangelo Buonarroti, the epochal Renaissance artist, did indeed view sculpting as a process of chiseling and scraping away

excess material from a block of stone to reveal the form embedded within (Gombrich, 1995). Consider the two sculptures in Figure 1. Panel A presents David, perhaps the most famous sculpture in the world. Michelangelo viewed his role less in terms of creating David than in terms of revealing it. The sculpture in Panel B, one of Michelangelo's incomplete statues, drives home the point. Although we recognize that this unfinished Slave is not conscious, we can almost feel him struggling to free himself from the rock.

According to Rusbult and Drigotas' sculpting metaphor, the uncarved block of stone is analogous to an individual's actual self (the person an individual actually is), whereas the completed sculpture is analogous to his or her ideal self (the person an individual aspires to become). Just as Michelangelo sculpted a block of marble into David, close relationship partners can "sculpt" each other in a manner that helps them move from their actual self toward their ideal self (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

In the present article, I offer a personal perspective on the power of the sculpting metaphor. I then consider the positive and negative ways in which the adoption of this metaphor has influenced research on the role that significant others play in each other's aspirational goal pursuit. I conclude with a call for additional, complementary metaphors that can direct scholarly attention toward important topics that the sculpting metaphor obscures.

A Personal Perspective

It's hard to overstate the strength of the sculpting metaphor's hold on me over the past two decades. Reading a preprint of the seminal Michelangelo phenomenon paper in 1997 factored into my decision to pursue my doctoral work with Rusbult at the University of North Carolina, initiating a collaboration that would produce
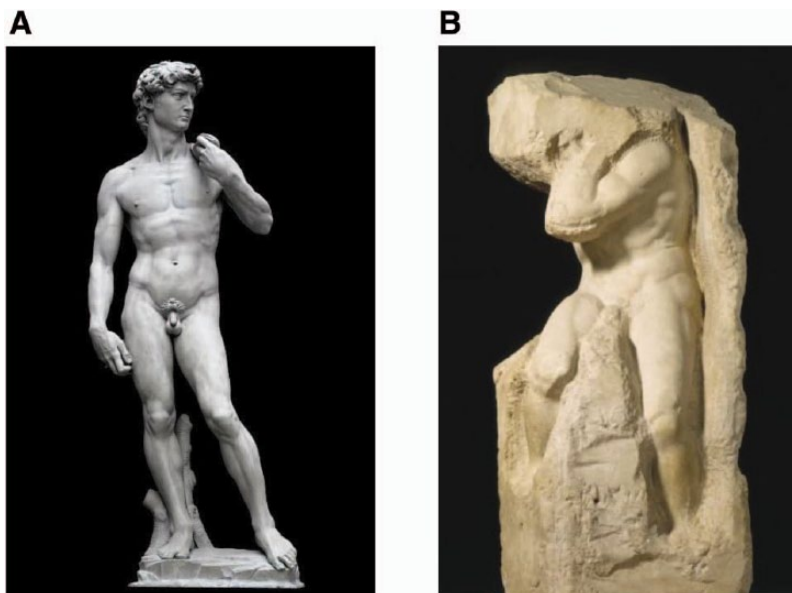
Figure 1. Two of Michelangelo Buonarroti's sculptures. According to Michelangelo, both David (left panel) and Atlas Slave (right panel) were slumbering within the rock; his job as sculptor was to set them free. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

several papers on this topic. Beyond those papers, the metaphor has deeply informed my broader program of research examining how significant others influence each other's goal pursuits, including my work on high-maintenance interaction (Dalton, Chartrand, & Finkel, 2010; Finkel et al., 2006) and transactive goal dynamics (Finkel & Fitzsimons, in press; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015).

But recently, as I was writing *The All-Or-Nothing Marriage* (Finkel, 2017), I began to question the validity of the metaphor. This book, which seeks to make sense of contemporary marriage in the United States, considers major historical developments like the transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies thousands of years ago and the emergence of Protestantism in 16th-century Europe, but it's especially attentive to the ways in which marriage has changed since the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. Leveraging Abraham Maslow's (1943, 1954) theorizing, the book's thesis is that the best marriages have been getting better over time while the average marriage has been getting worse. A primary reason for this divergence is that Americans' marital expectations have changed, especially vis-à-vis the role their marriage should play in facilitating their pursuit of authenticity and personal growth—what Maslow calls *self-actualization*. Maslow argues that self-actualizing is a difficult process, and this argument readily extends to self-actualizing through marriage. Consequently, relative to eras when Americans sought help from their spouse to fulfill less psychologically complex goals, more marriages are falling short today. At the same time, in comparison to fulfilling needs lower down Maslow's famous hierarchy (e.g., safety needs), meeting self-actualization needs yields "more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life" (Maslow, 1954, p. 99). Consequently, relative to those earlier eras, a successful marriage today is gratifying at a deeper level.

In the book, I leaned on the Michelangelo metaphor when talking about self-actualization. But, eventually, I began to doubt

whether a block of stone is an apt analog to the actual self and, even more so, whether a sculpture seeking release from the block of stone is an apt analog to the ideal self. Seeking insights from cognitive science and philosophy, I came to appreciate how adopting a particular metaphor sensitizes us to some phenomena while blinding us to others, a realization that triggered a desire to understand how the sculpting metaphor was influencing my thinking about the roles significant others play in influencing our goal setting, pursuit, and achievement.

The Power of Metaphor

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors do much more than help us express ideas elegantly—they fundamentally shape our perceptions and understanding of reality (also see Hofstadter & Sander, 2013; Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010). The authors illustrate this idea by discussing how we tend to think about concept *argument* with the metaphor "argument is war." Although we may not be fully cognizant of "believing in" this metaphor, it fundamentally alters how we conceptualize arguing.

> It is important to see that we do not just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4, emphasis in original).

But, ask Lakoff and Johnson, what would happen if a culture instead adopted the metaphor *argument is dance*? In such a culture, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture,

people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5)

Indeed, if we left our own culture to visit this other culture, we wouldn't even recognize such behavior as arguing, as the "argument is war" metaphor has so completely saturated our thinking about what arguing is that we cannot recognize alternative ways of thinking about the concept itself.

Closer to home—at least from the perspective of relationship science—Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 49) consider various metaphors for the concept *love*, including "love is a physical force" (e.g., "I found him magnetic"), "love is a patient" (e.g., "our relationship is healthy"), and "love is madness" (e.g., "I'm crazy about her"). To illustrate how metaphors structure our thinking, Lakoff and Johnson (pp. 139–140) contrast these conventional metaphors with a new one: "love is a collaborative work of art." As with all metaphors, this metaphor has entailments, including those linked to cultural beliefs surrounding collaboration, work, and work-of-art. Such entailments might include, for example: love is active, love requires cooperation, love requires dedication, love involves shared responsibility, love is an aesthetic experience, love is primarily valued for its own sake, love involves creativity, and love cannot be achieved by formula.

To the extent that we adopt the "love is a collaborative work" of art metaphor rather than one of the conventional metaphors, we think about love in a fundamentally different way. For example, whereas the "love as a physical force" and the "love is madness" metaphors cast lovers in a passive role in which they are subject to physical or psychological forces beyond their control, the "love is a collaborative work of art" metaphor casts lovers in an active role in which they are part of a deliberate, shared effort to create a unique work of beauty. In doing so, the new metaphor does what all metaphors do—it highlights some features while obscuring others, influencing how we think, feel, and behave. A partner who is a good fit (and a potential marriage partner) from a "love is a physical force" perspective might be a poor fit (and a potential breakup target) from a "love is a collaborative work of art" perspective.

The Sculpting Metaphor: An Essentialist Perspective on the Ideal Self

In ways that I didn't notice until recently, the sculpting metaphor has served similar functions vis-à-vis my own thinking and the scholarly literature more generally. Consider again David (Figure 1, Panel A), which Michelangelo carved from a block of Carrara marble so huge that Florentines circa 1500 called it The Giant. The sculptors Agostino di Duccio and Antonio Rossellino had failed in their attempts to sculpt The Giant in 1464 and 1475, respectively. Both of them declared the marble to be of inadequate quality, and the gouges they inflicted rendered any subsequent attempt even more daunting. The Giant reposed, neglected and exposed to the elements, until Michelangelo was commissioned to carve it in 1501. Like most contemporary Florentines, he knew about The Giant. Indeed, he had long dreamed of "freeing the figure inside." This aspiration suggests that in Michelangelo's mind, David existed within the rock before sculpting began—perhaps for eons or even, for all practical purposes, forever—and Michelangelo's task was to release him.

Is this metaphor apt? Is the ideal self akin to a sculpture that yearns for freedom from a block of stone in which it has been imprisoned for time immemorial? Answering this question requires that we consider what the *ideal self* actually is. Unfortunately, scholars have generated conceptual and terminological confusion by both using various definitions of this term and introducing many overlapping terms—*true self*, *real self*, *authentic self*, *intrinsic self*, *essential self*, *deep self*, and so forth. Sometimes, these terms are treated as interchangeable (e.g., Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017), and doing so is probably reasonable when considering that research on the Michelangelo phenomenon has conceptualized the ideal self as possessing an inherent, stable core—a true, real, authentic, intrinsic, essential entity representing who the individual is "deep down inside." In general, belief in the existence of this sort of ideal, or true, self manifests as a form of psychological essentialism in which individuals are viewed as possessing unobservable, inherent, unitary, immutable, and morally upstanding qualities that are clearly distinct from their more surface-level, less "true" qualities (Christy, Schlegel, & Cimpian, 2018; De Freitas, Cikara, Grossmann, & Schlegel, 2017; Landau et al., 2011; Strohminger et al., 2017).

This conceptualization of the ideal, true self has deep roots in the Western intellectual canon (McMahon, 2006). For example, Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century theologian, drew on Aristotle to conceptualize happiness as a process through which we achieve our potential by fully actualizing ourselves. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18th-century philosopher, lamented that the advances of the Enlightenment had alienated individuals from their essential nature. Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th-century philosopher, considered at length the importance—and difficulty—of living in accord with one's true self. Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1954) built on this intellectual tradition in developing humanistic psychology (also see Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is only when the individual "fully experiences the feelings which at an organic level he *is*," asserted Rogers (1961), "that he is being a part of his real self" (p. 111). The individual will experience "discontent and restlessness," argued Maslow (1943), unless he "is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be" (p. 382).

Is the Ideal Self Discovered or Created?

Of course, the Western canon also offers less essentialist approaches for thinking about the ideal, or true, self. We can contrast the *self-discovery* approach to knowing this aspirational self—in which the pursuit of such knowledge comes through a process, akin to archaeology, in which individuals seek to find and make sense of something that already exists—with a *self-creation* approach in which the pursuit of such knowledge comes through a process, akin to inventing, in which individuals seek to design and construct something novel (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012; Waterman, 1984).[1] John Locke, the 17th-century philosopher, drew on Aristotle to argue that humans do not possess a core essence; they begin, instead, as a blank

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[1] On average, people tend to find the self-discovery metaphor much more plausible than the self-creation metaphor (Schlegel et al., 2012). Whether there actually exists an ideal, true self is a topic of ongoing debate within both philosophy and psychology.

slate on which experience imprints itself.[2] Jean-Paul Sartre, the 20th-century philosopher, argued that individuals have no inherent essence and therefore must create their own identity.

In my reading, the sculpting metaphor hews much more closely to the self-discovery than to the self-creation metaphor, aligning with the view that people have a stable ideal self, presumably from a very young age, that possesses the same form regardless of who the sculptor is and when the sculpting process begins. And yet, research on the Michelangelo phenomenon adopts an expansive and inclusive definition of the ideal self that owes more to social cognition research (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986) than to humanistic psychology. Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, and Finkel (2009) have defined the *ideal self* as "an individual's dreams and aspirations, or the constellation of skills, traits, and resources that an individual ideally wishes to acquire" (p. 305) This definition makes no assumptions about where the ideal self comes from, and it certainly doesn't require that the ideal self approximate a long-embedded sculpture.

Once we probe such assumptions, strange questions present themselves: When, in the stone's development, did the sculpture come into existence? Or, pivoting from a geologic to a human timescale: Did the essence of the sculpture exist in the mind of the sculptor before it existed within the rock (and, if so, doesn't that undermine the essential idea underlying the Michelangelo phenomenon)? Such questions led me on a rather quixotic journey through several subfields of philosophy to discern the nature of selfhood, all of which posed vexing questions and none of which provided straightforward answers.[3] In any case, if we adopt the inclusive definition of ideal self from Rusbult, Kumashiro, et al. (2009), jettisoning the essentialist assumptions implying that the ideal self has existed in perpetuity and yearns to be set free, we find ourselves with a broader conceptual palette, one that promotes a more diverse set of research questions.

Toward a Broader Conceptual Palette

When Rusbult and Drigotas published their seminal article (Drigotas et al., 1999), few papers in social psychology had explored the roles that significant others play in influencing each other's goal pursuit. Indeed, although close relationships literature and the self-regulation literature were both flourishing, the cross-talk between them was negligible. Fast forward 20 years, and that void has been filled. Today, research on how significant others influence each other's goal setting, pursuit, and achievement is so robust that it's reasonable to question whether research on goal-related processes deserves a broader name than *self*-regulation. Perhaps a more inclusive goal, like *goal dynamics*, would make more sense (Finkel & Fitzsimons, in press). The sculpting metaphor served as a crucial early step in integrating the literature on close relationships with the literature on goal dynamics, while also training scholarly attention on particularly important goals—those linked to the ideal self.

But, as with all metaphors, this one obscures some features even as it highlights others. Here, we'll consider three of the features the metaphor obscures, offering an analysis that leverages my best understanding of what the metaphor means, as scholars in this literature (myself included) have been vague on these issues. First, the sculpting metaphor focuses on discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self, but the ideal self is just one of many possible selves, including the ought self and the feared self (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

> Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. . . . Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954)

To be sure, research on the Michelangelo phenomenon has appreciated that significant others can influence each other in ways that push them further from (rather than closer to) their ideal self, but the metaphor provides little guidance for understanding which self guides are most influential under what circumstances or for discerning the interpersonal processes that are most effective as a function of those circumstances.

Second, the ideal self—not to mention the ought self, the feared self, and so forth—changes over time. The sculpting metaphor directs attention to changes in the actual self, but it directs attention away from changes in the ideal self. Research on the Michelangelo phenomenon sometimes assesses the qualities of the ideal self more than once in longitudinal studies, but it offers few insights into why or how the ideal self would change. Indeed, if we focus on the sculpting metaphor rather than on the social–cognitive definition of the ideal self, it's not clear why one would expect any change in the ideal self. Of course, to the extent that there really is an ideal, true self in humanistic psychology sense (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961), there may well be a molar level at which the ideal self doesn't change. But even if that's the case, scholars interested in understanding how relationship partners influence each other's goal dynamics will want to know how the content of the ideal self changes over time, as when people decide they want to become a parent or switch careers. And as the content of one's ideal self changes over time, the extent to which a particular relationship partner is effective at sculpting us will change, too. As scholars consider how the ideal self changes over time, it'll be important to address the role of significant others in influencing this change (via modeling, inspiration, etc.).

Third, people are actively engaged with the pursuit of their own ideal self. The sculpting metaphor implies that individuals are passive recipients of their significant others' sculpting efforts. They are confined within the rock, waiting helplessly for somebody to start chiseling. The real-life analog to the unfinished Atlas Slave (see Figure 1, Panel B) may well have cleared his head by now. Here the story gets particularly interesting, as this insight raises exciting questions about the role of dyadic processes in determining goal achievement and personal growth. For example, are some sculptures (e.g., people low in attachment avoidance) especially receptive to some sorts of sculpting (e.g., emotion-focused support)? Any comprehensive theory of the role that significant others play in each other's goal setting, pursuit, and achievement will need to consider the sculpture, the sculptor, and their interaction—not to mention features of the immediate situation. It isn't clear how readily the sculpting metaphor can be

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[2] This means that Aristotle's ideas were foundational for both the self-discovery and self-creation perspectives.

[3] Thank you, philosophy, as always.

adapted for this purpose (although I suppose some sculptors are better with bronze and others are better with marble, which could be a decent start).

The Psychological Consequences of the Sculpting Metaphor

Beyond the implications for scholarship, are there implications of the sculpting metaphor for individuals' psychological functioning? My intuition is that there are, and that these implications are mixed. For example, on the positive side of the ledger, belief in the existence of an ideal, true self is linked to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in one's life, especially among those who manifest more extensive self-knowledge (Schlegel et al., 2012). In addition, the explicit contrast between one's actual and ideal self—in conjunction with the belief that growth toward the ideal self is possible—is likely to motivate people to pursue self-improvement (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Such motivation and effort can arise in the absence of the metaphor, of course, as simply holding a goal that one thinks is achievable can be motivating. But the elegance and intuitive appeal of the sculpting metaphor can potentially inspire self-improvement efforts that regular goal setting may not—while at the same time inspiring relationship partners to work to bring out the best in each other.

On the negative side, the sort of essentialist thinking associated with believing in an ideal, true self is often problematic. For example, research by Carol Dweck and others suggests that people who hold essentialized beliefs are at risk for achievement failure, especially after encountering setbacks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; for a meta-analytic synthesis, see Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013).

Toward Complementary Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 243) considered an array of possible metaphors for the concept *marriage*: "Is your marriage a partnership, a journey through life together, a haven from the outside world, a means for growth, or a union of two people into a third entity?" Adopting one of these metaphors over the others has potentially profound implications for which partner is a good fit for us, which interactions make us happy or unhappy with our spouse, and so forth. Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander (2013)—who talked in terms of the superordinate category of analogies (a metaphor is a type of analogy)—help us understand why: "analogies *coerce* us: they force our thoughts to flow along certain channels. . . . Put otherwise, an analogy will not be content with merely crashing the party; having shown up, it then dictates the rest of the evening" (p. 257).

At the same time, however, Hofstadter and Sander (2013) underscored that there's no alternative to thinking in terms of analogy—that is, simply stated, how humans think. Consequently, the goal isn't to avoid the coercive effects of analogous, or metaphorical, thinking, but rather to harness it to achieve positive outcomes like greater accuracy and more successful lives. When considering the role that significant others play in each other's goal setting, pursuit, and achievement, we need a readily accessible suite of generative, complementary metaphors.

One essential step is to integrate the sculpting metaphor with other metaphors in this research space. Perhaps the most relevant

is Arthur Aron and Elaine Aron's (1986) self-expansion metaphor, according to which people have a fundamental motivation to expand their self-concept and a central mechanism through which they do so is by incorporating into their own self-concept their significant others' resources, perspectives, and characteristics. Brent Mattingly, Gary Lewandowski, and Kevin McIntyre (2014) have extended this work by suggesting that the effects of significant others on each other's self-concept vary along orthogonal dimensions of positivity-negativity and increase-decrease. Partners who increase each other's positive qualities produce self-expansion, partners who increase each other's negative qualities produce *self-adulteration*, partners who decrease each other's positive qualities produce *self-contraction*, and partners who decrease each other's negative qualities produce *self-pruning*. Concepts like self-adulteration and self-contraction presumably have important implications for *self-protection* (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

When we have gleaned from the literature and integrated a complementary suite of existing metaphors, we'll need to consider the ways in which those metaphors collectively obscure important interpersonal processes—and then, ideally, to develop additional metaphors to shine a light on those shadowy spots. My intuition is that the important places where we need bolstered metaphorical coverage surround dyadic processes. Perhaps we'll need to incorporate metaphors from therapy or coaching, although such metaphors tend to make assumptions about role asymmetry (with one person as the giver and the other as the recipient); in most adult relationships, the "sculpting" process goes both directions. What's clear is that there's significant unexplored terrain here, and motivated adventurers are likely to unearth many treasures.[4]

Conclusion

According to Nietzsche, "No one can build you the bridge on which you, and only you, must cross the river of life." In a sense, he's right—in the end, we are responsible for our own lives. But, in a deeper sense, he's wrong—significant others can work with us to build the bridge. They can also make the journey pleasurable by adding beauty to the water and lending us a hand as we cross the bridge. Whatever the metaphor, the ways in which significant others influence each other's goal setting, pursuit, and achievement are often sufficient to distinguish a happy, meaningful life from a sad, empty one.

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[4] See what I did there?

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