At one time or another, most of us have been cognizant of ourselves behaving differently around someone close to us, whether a romantic partner, friend, or parent. When Joe is with his domineering parents, he shifts away from his usually assertive demeanor toward a more submissive one. With her best friend, Sarah “lets her hair down,” revealing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reserved just for this friend. Indeed, spouses often bring out the best (or worst) in each other. All of these instances suggest the special nature of people’s actions in relation to close others.

In this chapter, we describe our theory and research on the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral tendencies people exhibit in relation to their significant others. Together, these self-aspects constitute what we call relational selves. Our theoretical perspective is distinct in part because it is grounded in transference, the phenomenon whereby aspects of past relationships, including the associated relational selves, re-surface in encounters with new others. As such, our work speaks to not only the relational nature of the self in interactions with significant others, but also its re-emergence in day-to-day encounters with new people.

Below, we first describe the social-cognitive model of transference on which our theory of the relational self is based, followed by this theory’s key postulates. We then turn to evidence that relational selves are activated in the context of transference, thereby eliciting a host of intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences. From there, we compare and contrast our work with a number of other perspectives on the self and relationships, including several represented in this volume. Finally, we consider relational selves in the context of the broader self system.
LOCATING THE RELATIONAL SELF IN TRANSFERENCE

Clinicians view transference (Freud, 1912/1958; Sullivan, 1953) as a tool by which the therapist allows himself or herself to be the object of the client’s transference as a means of helping the client resolve maladaptive relational patterns. By contrast, we take a social-cognitive approach, which specifies the mental structures and processes that account for the occurrence of transference within therapeutic settings and in daily life.

The Social-Cognitive Model of Transference

Our model of transference assumes that mental representations of significant others are stored in memory, constituting warehouses of knowledge about these important individuals, including beliefs about their physical and personality attributes, as well as their internal states, such as their thoughts and feelings (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1999; Chen, 2003). Because of the emotional and motivational import of significant others, these representations are infused with affect and motivation. Significant-other representations are considered to be exemplars (e.g., Smith & Zarate, 1995), each designating a specific individual rather than a social category or type, such as “Blacks” or “politicians” (e.g., Andersen & Klatzky, 1987; Cantor & Mischel, 1979). Although they may contain generic knowledge—that is, generalizations about the significant other—it is this person that accounts for the associations among such knowledge, rather than a generic category label. Exemplar- and category-based processing are distinguishable in various ways (e.g., Smith & Zarate, 1992), but the activation and use of exemplars follow general principles of knowledge accessibility (e.g., Higgins, 1996a).

We define transference as occurring when a perceivers representation of a significant other is activated in an encounter with a new person—for example, because of the person’s physical resemblance to the significant other, or to the overlap of his or her personality attributes with the significant other’s. Upon such activation, the perceivers interprets the person in ways derived from the significant-other representation, and responds to the person in ways that reflect the self–other relationship. Although nomothetic, social-cognitive processes—namely, the activation and use of mental representations—account for the occurrence of transference, we maintain that the content and meaning of significant-other representations are idiosyncratic, unique to each perceivers.

Research has shown that significant-other representations are chronically accessible, implying they are in a constant state of high activation readiness (e.g., Higgins & King, 1981), but has also shown that transient cues further increase their accessibility (Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995). Transient activation can occur based on priming, which involves incidental cues in the environment, or based on applicability, which involves attended-to cues in a stimulus person. In each case, the “match” between stored knowledge and the cues heightens the likelihood of knowledge activation and use (Higgins, 1996a; see also Andersen, Moskowitz, Blair, & Nosek, 2007). The vast majority of research on transference has used applicability to transiently activate significant-other representations. Specifically, we have used attributes of a significant other to characterize a stimulus person to increase the accessibility of the corresponding significant-other representation. In other words, the attribute-based resemblance of the person to the significant other triggers transference. We view such applicability-based cues as an analog for those perceivers encounter in ordinary, face-to-face interactions (Chen & Andersen, 1999; Chen, Andersen, & Hinkle, 1999).

To study transference, we use a two-session paradigm that involves both idiosyncratic and nomothetic elements. In a pretest session participants name a significant other (e.g., parent, friend), and then generate descriptors to characterize this person. Several weeks later, they are led to anticipate an interaction with another participant in an ostensibly unrelated session. Participants then go through a learning phase in which they are presented with descriptors allegedly about their upcoming partner. For participants in the “Own” condition, some of these descriptors are derived from ones they previously generated about their significant other. In other words, their partner resembles their own significant other, thus triggering transference. By contrast, “Yoked” participants are shown descriptors about someone else’s significant other and thus transference is not elicited. Own and Yoked participants are paired on a one-to-one basis so that the descriptor stimuli used across conditions are identical, but differ in their meaning and significance to Own versus Yoked participants.

After the learning phase, transference is assessed using one or both of two standard measures. One is a recognition-memory test that measures representation-derived inferences about the partner. Such inferences are indexed by participants’ confidence that they learned about the partner that are true of their significant other, but were not actually presented. In short, this measure taps participants’ inference that the partner is more like their significant other than is the case. The other measure, which asks participants to evaluate their partner, assumes that the affect associated with significant-other representations is elicited upon activation of these representations (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1987). Evidence for transference takes the form of Own participants evaluating the partner more positively when the partner resembled their own positively (vs. negatively) regarding significant other, with no such pattern among Yoked participants. In short, this measure taps whether participants evaluate their partner as they evaluate their significant other.

Over 15 years of research has documented transference using these measures. Included in this body of work is evidence that transference may occur nonconsciously (Glassman & Andersen, 1999; see also Anderson, Reznik, & Glassman, 2005; Chen, Fittsimons, & Andersen, 2006). In other words, people need not consciously draw analogies between significant and new others for transference to occur. Inferences and evaluations of new others derived from significant-other representations are core to the phenomenon, but transference also elicits a myriad of consequences involving the selves people are with their significant others.
A Transference-Based Approach to the Relational Self

Our theory of the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002) assumes that every individual possesses a repertoire of relational selves, each reflecting aspects of the self with a particular significant other. Extending the social-cognitive model of transference, we posit that significant-other representations and relational selves are linked by knowledge reflecting the typical patterns of relating to the significant other. As a result of such linkages, when a significant-other representation is activated, this activation spreads to the relevant relational self, leading the perceiver to experience the self as he or she does when with the significant other. In working self-concept terms, transference slices a shift in the content of the working self-concept toward relational-self knowledge. In this respect, our theory coheres with numerous theoretical approaches that discuss contextual variability in the self (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Our theory is especially closely tied to Mischel and Shoda’s (1995) model of personality, which posits that each individual’s personality is composed of a unique pattern of IF–THEN relations. IFs are objective situations, and THENs are the outward responses people exhibit in them. IF–THEN relations are mediated by the “psychological situations” that are elicited by objective situations. These psychological situations derive from cognitive-affective units, such as encoding, expectations, and goal strategies. The model posits cross-situational malleability in the self, but captures stability at the level of a person’s overall pattern of IF–THEN relations. Applied to our theory, IFs are situations in which transference occurs, and THENs are responses reflecting the relevant relational self. These IF–THENs are mediated by cognitive-affective units contained within the activated significant-other representation and relational self. Malleability in the self lies in the activation of different significant-other representations and relational selves across contexts, but stability is found in the consistent activation of particular representations and relational selves in the same contexts.

Finally, we assume that relational selves consist of attribute- and role-based aspects of the self with significant others. They also include positive and negative self-evaluations, the affect experienced when with a significant other, the goals pursued in the relationship, the self-regulatory strategies used, and the behaviors enacted. Like significant-other representations, the content of relational selves is largely idiographic, but also includes socially shared facets, like the role occupied with significant others and the standards others hold for the self.

ACTIVATING RELATIONAL SELVES IN TRANSFERENCE

We now turn to evidence for the activation of relational selves in transference. Reflecting the wide-ranging content of relational selves, when such activation occurs, people exhibit a host of intrapersonal and interpersonal responses in their interactions with new others.

Self-Definition and Self-Evaluation

When a significant-other representation is activated, the working self-concept should be infused in part with associated relational-self knowledge. Thus the perceiver’s subjective self-definings and self-evaluations should come to reflect this relational self. Several studies support this. In one study, participants did five feature-listing tasks at pretest (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). They first described themselves as a baseline self-concept measure. They then described both a positively and a negatively regarded significant other, after which they described themselves as they are when with each person, as a baseline measure of each relational self. In the second session, participants were presented with descriptors about a new person who either did (Own condition) or did not (Yoked condition) resemble their positive or negative significant other. Afterward, they listed descriptors to characterize themselves at that moment (assessing their working self-concept), and classified each listed descriptor as positive or negative (assessing self-evaluation).

To assess shifts in the working self-concept toward the relational self, we first calculated the overlap between the descriptors of participants’ baseline working self-concept and each relational self. Controlling for this pretest overlap, participants in the Own condition, for whom transference was elicited as a result of the new person’s resemblance to one of their significant others, showed a greater shift in their working self-concept toward the relevant relational self, relative to Yoked participants. This finding held for both positive and negative significant others. Also in evidence were shifts in self-evaluation reflecting the overall evaluation of the significant other. Specifically, we summed the positive and negative classifications that participants ascribed to those self-descriptors in the second session that overlapped with their pretest relational self. Own participants evaluated these overlapping descriptors more positively when the new person resembled their positive, rather than negative, significant other. This effect was not seen among Yoked participants. Hence, when transference occurs, both self-definition and self-evaluation shift to reflect the relevant relational self.

Similar evidence exists for significant others who are positively evaluated, but around whom one experiences a dreaded self (Reznik & Andersen, 2005). Activating the representation of such a significant other should elicit this dreaded self, thus producing negative shifts in self-definition and self-evaluation. To test this, it was assumed that all people can think of a significant other who they love but around whom they behave badly (i.e., have a dreaded self), as well as a significant other with whom they are at their best (i.e., have a desired self). Using the transference paradigm, participants learned about a new person who resembled a positive significant other (Own condition) associated with either a dreaded or a desired self, or learned about a person who resembled someone else’s significant other (Yoked condition).

Once again, Own participants’ working self-concept shifted toward the relevant relational self—namely, the dreaded self when the new person resembled the significant other around whom participants are at their worst, and the desired self when the person resembled the significant other with whom participants are at their best. Moreover, the self-descriptors involved in the shift were evaluated.
more negatively in the dreaded-self condition, and more positively in the desired-self one, in the Own relative to the Yoked condition. Hence, when the dreaded or desired self is activated in transference, self-evaluation reflecting the valence of the relational self arises, even though the valence of the significant-other representation was held constant.

Finally, research has examined the impact of accepting significant others on stigmatized individuals’ self-evaluations (Tapias & Chen, 2006). The hypothesis was that significant others who pair their acceptance with an acknowledgment of the negativity of a stigmatizing attribute that individuals believe they have will foster positively evaluated relational selves. Activating the representation of such a significant other should therefore elicit positive self-evaluations. In this research, just prior to encountering a new person, self-perceived overweight women visualized an accepting significant other who acknowledged their overweight stigma. The applicability of the significant other’s views to inferring those of the new person was varied—for example, by leading participants to believe that the views of close others are similar and thus applicable to inferring the views of strangers, or different from and thus inappropriate for inferring the views of strangers. The results showed that priming a stigma-acknowledging, accepting significant other led participants to evaluate themselves more positively in anticipation of meeting the new person when the significant other’s views were applicable to the new person’s, relative to conditions involving non-acknowledging or inapplicable significant others.

Expectations of Acceptance or Rejection

Numerous theoretical perspectives highlight the important role played by people’s expectations of significant others’ acceptance and rejection (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996). We assume that such expectations are stored in the linkages between significant-other representations and relational-self knowledge, such that they play out in transference encounters. Indeed, several transference studies have shown that participants in the Own condition expect more acceptance from an upcoming partner when the partner resembled a positively versus negatively regarded significant other, a pattern not observed among Yoked participants (Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996; Reznik & Andersen, 2005).

The research on significant others and stigma also assessed stigmatized women’s acceptance and rejection expectations about an upcoming partner (Tapias & Chen, 2006). Several studies showed that priming participants with a stigma-acknowledging, accepting significant other led to more expected acceptance from the partner, compared to priming a non-acknowledging significant other, when the significant others’ views were applicable to inferring the partners’ views. Moreover, expectations carried through to the end of the interaction, in that participants primed with an acknowledging and applicable significant other were most likely to report that their partner accepted them after the interaction.

On the other hand, recent work on physically or psychologically abusive family members in transference (Bersonson & Andersen, 2006) arranged that female participants with and without an abusive parent expected to interact with a partner who resembled this parent (Own condition) or did not (Yoked condition). The results showed that Own but not Yoked participants with an abusive parent expected more rejection from the new person than did their counterparts without an abusive parent. They were also more likely to report disliking, mistrusting, and being indifferent toward the person.

Goals and Motives

Significant others enable people to satisfy the fundamental need for connection (Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This desire to be emotionally close, to connect, should be stored in the linkages binding significant-other representations and relational selves, and thus activated in transference. Indeed, several studies have shown that Own but not Yoked participants were more motivated to be emotionally open with, and not distant from, a new person who resembled a positively rather than a negatively evaluated significant other (Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000; Reznik & Andersen, 2007).

Research has also explored the self-evaluative motives pursued when relational selves are activated. Given that people seek self-verifying appraisals from significant others (e.g., Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994), it was hypothesized that self-verification motives are activated along with the relational self in transference (Kraus & Chen, 2007). Consistent with this, participants reported wanting the new person who resembled their significant other (vs. not) to evaluate them more in a manner that verified their core relational self-views.

Evidence for the activation of goal-related elements of relational selves can also be found outside the transference context. For example, research has shown that subliminal exposure to the name of a significant other leads people to behave in line with goals associated with this other (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). Moreover, activation of a significant-other representation increases the accessibility of the goals associated with the other, as well as goal commitment and persistence, particularly when participants are close to this other and believe he or she values the goal (Shah, 2003a). Significant others' expectations about one's goal attainment also color one's own appraisals of the difficulty of attaining the relevant goal (Shah, 2003b).

Other work has assessed how chronically unsatisfied goals with significant others play out in transference (Berk & Andersen, 2007). Specifically, self-reported hostility increases when a representation of a positive significant other with whom one chronically experiences unsatisfied (vs. satisfied) goals for affection is activated in an encounter with a new person. Moreover, when the new person resembles a family member—a significant other who was not chosen and is thus "irrevocable"—these increases in hostility were linked to behaviors in an experimental task that were designed to solicit acceptance from the person.

Elicitation and Disruption of Affect

The affect-laden nature of significant-other representations suggests that the emotional meaning of significant-other relationships should be elicited in transference...
(Andersen & Baum, 1994). To test this, the immediate facial movements of participants while reading each descriptor about a new person in the learning phase of the transference paradigm were covertly videotaped (Andersen et al., 1996). Naive judges then rated the pleasantness of participants’ facial expressions of emotion. The results showed that Own but not Yoked participants expressed more pleasant facial affect when their positive rather than negative significant-other representation was activated. Thus transference elicits the affect associated with the significant other.

Further evidence comes from the research on abusive significant others (Berenson & Andersen, 2006). In this work, beyond learning about an upcoming partner who did or did not resemble a parent who was or was not abusive, participants were told that the partner was becoming tense and irritable “at this moment” (or was not). Own participants with an abusive parent actually reported less dysphoric mood in response to this irritability cue, showing relatively “flat affect,” while this cue spiked the dysphoric mood of abused participants in the Yoked condition. No such differences emerged among non-abused participants. Thus, despite reports of rejection expectations, dislike, mistrust, and indifference by abused women, noted earlier, these women may show a kind of “emotional numbing” response in transference, reflecting the emotional shutdown they used to cope with their abusive relationship.

Affect reflecting the overall affective tone of a relationship tends to be chronically experienced in the relationship. However, circumstances external and internal to the person may disrupt this affect, which should be detectable in transference. Indeed, one study showed that negative affect ensues when the representation of a positively regarded significant other is activated with a new person whose role (e.g., “novice”) vis-à-vis the self is incongruent with the significant other’s role (e.g., “authority figure”) (Baum & Andersen, 1999). Such role violations disrupt the positive affect typically enjoyed in positive significant-other relationships, presumably because such role incongruence signals that the goals one typically pursues in the significant-other relationship are unlikely to be met.

Disrupted positive affect may also occur when the representation of a positive significant other associated with a dreaded self is activated. In the research on dreaded selves (Reznik & Andersen, 2005). Own participants expecting to meet a new person who resembled such a significant other showed less positive and more negative mood relative to participants in the Yoked condition. By contrast, activating the representation of a positive significant other associated with a desired self elicited positive affect compared to the Yoked condition.

Finally, research has also examined the emotional states evoked by activating a representation of a parent with whom one has a secure, preoccupied, dismissive, or fearful attachment (Andersen, Bartz, Berenson, & Kecskemethy, 2006). Evoking transference involving a parent to whom one is securely attached produced increases in positive affect (relative to the corresponding Yoked condition, an effect not seen in the preoccupied, dismissive, or fearful conditions). Greater positive affect was also seen among secure relative to insecurely attached participants in the Own versus Yoked conditions. At a more specific level, transference involving a parent with whom participants had a preoccupied attachment led to increases in anxiety relative to the Yoked condition, an effect not seen in the other groups. Finally, transference in the dismissive attachment condition produced large decreases in hostility compared to the Yoked condition, in which hostility was greatly elevated relative to that shown by other participants. This suggests the kind of suppressed emotion—namely, suppressed hostility—characteristic of avoidant relationships in the context of transference.

**Self-Regulation**

Two primary forms of self-regulation have been studied in the context of transference. The first pertains to efforts to meet significant-other-related standards, and the second to strategic responses aimed at defending the self and one’s relationship in the face of threat.

In the first case, research has drawn on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which maintains that people are aware of the standpoints of significant others on their actual, ideal, and ought selves (in addition to their own standpoints). As such, significant-other standpoints are likely to be stored as part of relational selves, and the activation of a relational self should activate the ideal and ought self-guides held by the relevant significant other. To the degree that actual–ideal discrepancies exist, dejection-related affect should ensue, whereas actual–ought discrepancies should elicit agitation-related affect.

To test these predictions, participants who had an ideal or ought self-discrepancy from the standpoint of a parent learned descriptors about a new person who did or did not resemble this parent (Reznik & Andersen, 2007). Activating the parent representation should activate the associated relational self, including the ideal or ought self-discrepancy from the parent’s standpoint. Indeed, ideal-discrepant participants reported more dejection-related affect, whereas ought-discrepant participants reported more agitation-related affect, as reflected by hostility.

Regulating the self with respect to ideal standards reflects a promotion regulatory focus, (a focus on attaining positive outcomes), whereas self-regulation in the service of ought standards reflects a prevention focus (a focus on preventing negative outcomes) (e.g., Higgins, 1996b). If activating a parent representation activates the self-discrepancy from this parent’s standpoint, the self-regulatory focus with respect to this other should also emerge in transference. Ideal-discrepant participants in the above research should therefore show greater approach tendencies toward their partner, whereas ought-discrepant participants should show more avoidance. Supporting this, ideal-discrepant Own participants reported less motivation to avoid their partner in anticipation of meeting him or her, relative to after learning the meeting would not occur (at which point promotion was no longer relevant). By contrast, ought-discrepant Own participants reported more avoidance motivation before relative to after learning the meeting would not occur (at which point prevention was no longer relevant). This asymmetrical approach/avoidance pattern was not seen among Yoked participants.

Research on the second form of self-regulation has examined both self- and
groups appeared to transform the negative, irritability cue into positive affect. Thus, even when maladaptive and potentially dangerous relationships are involved (among those who were abused), activating the associated significant-other representation and relational self evokes self-regulatory responses that protect these relationships.

**Interpersonal Behavior**

Finally, when the relational self is activated, this includes expectations regarding the significant other's acceptance or rejection, which should have implications for behavior in transference encounters. Indeed, wide-ranging research shows that perceivers' expectations about a target person are often fulfilled by virtue of perceivers' tendency to act in line with these expectations and the target's tendency to respond in kind. Such a self-fulfilling cycle has in fact been demonstrated in transference.

In this work, participants (perceivers) were exposed to descriptors about another participant (target) with whom they then had an audiotaped conversation (Berk & Anderson, 2000). The target resembled the perceivers' own (or a yoked participant's) positive or negative significant other. The pleasantness of the affect expressed in participants' conversational behavior was coded. It was hypothesized that the relational self associated with the positive or negative significant other should be activated in transference in such a way that people behave in line with their positive or negative assumptions, respectively, thus eliciting confirmatory behavior in the target. Indeed, the target expressed more pleasant affect when he or she resembled the perceivers' positive rather than negative significant other; no such effect was seen in the yoked conditions. Thus, assumptions derived from perceivers' relational selves are activated in transference, and thereby elicit confirmatory behavior in targets.

Conceptually similar results were found in the research on stigma (Tapia & Chen, 2006). Participants primed with an acknowledging and accepting significant other prior to interacting with a new person to whom the significant other's views were seen as applicable reported higher expectations of acceptance, as noted. In addition, however, they displayed less negative affect and self-disclosed more, relative to participants primed with non-acknowledging or inapplicable significant others. Moreover, these participants were evaluated more favorably by independent judges viewing a videotape of their interaction with the new person. These positive effects on stigmatized people's interpersonal behavior, and in turn others' evaluations of them, suggest a means by which self-fulfilling cycles of rejection initiated by stigma-based expectations of rejection may be circumvented.

**COMPARING AND CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES**

Our theory of the relational self inspired much of the research described above, but our data cohere with and complement findings emerging from several other bodies of work. In this section, we highlight points of convergence and divergence.
between our theoretical approach and three prominent lines of work that similarly address the self and relationships. In doing so, we suggest ways in which our perspective and the others may mutually inform one another (for further discussion, see Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006).

Relational Schemas

According to Baldwin (1992), a relational schema consists of schemas of the self and the significant other in the self-other relationship, which are linked by an interpersonal script. This script consists of if-then contingencies of interaction (e.g., “If I assert myself, then my mother will treat me with respect”) that embody expectations about how significant others will respond to the self, built from past interpersonal experiences. People derive rules of self-inference from repeated exposure to such if-then contingencies. For example, the contingency “If I make a mistake, then others will criticize and reject me” may give rise to the self-inference rule “If I make a mistake, then I am unworthy” (Baldwin, 1997, p. 329).

Numerous parallels exist between our theory and the relational schema perspective. First, the self-schema component of relational schemas is akin to our relational-self construct, as both refer to the self in the relevant relationship, and both are viewed as distinct from knowledge about significant others. In addition, the interpersonal script component of relational schemas fits our assumption regarding linkages between relational-self and significant-other knowledge. Positing such linkages is important because it distinguishes relational schema and transference perspectives from models that conceptualize the impact of relationships on the self in terms of the internalization of significant-other elements into the self, rather than in terms of self-aspects formed in relation to significant others.

The two perspectives also converge in assumptions about chronic and transient sources of activating relational-self knowledge. In relational schema terms, when contextual cues activate a significant-other schema, this triggers associated if-then rules that shift views of the self toward self-conceptions in the relevant relationship (Baldwin, 1997). Research has also shown that relational schemas may be chronically accessible (e.g., Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajan, 1996), implying that at times little contextual cuing is needed to activate them.

Theoretical parallels notwithstanding, research on relational schemas and transference has tended to differ in emphasis and methodological differences that suggest ways in which the two bodies of work might extend one another. For example, although both perspectives assume that relational-self knowledge is formed on the basis of repeated activation of particular self-aspects in interactions with significant others, relational schema research offers particular precision regarding the mechanisms underlying this formation. Namely, self-inferences are derived through the repeated use of if-then rules, which are procedural knowledge structures that dictate the self-inferences that follow given particular responses from significant others (Baldwin, 1997). Such if-then rules are readily incorporated into our transference-based view of the relational self. When a significant-other representation is activated, if-then self-inference rules (derived from repeated interactions with the relevant significant other) may be activated, thus leading to the shift toward relational-self aspects that occurs in transference.

As another example, as transference refers to the re-surfacing of prior relationships in interactions with new others, our research has relied on attribute-based cues in a new person that match the attributes of a perceiver’s significant other to activate a significant-other representation and its associated relational self. In other words, the activation cues we use emanate directly from new people themselves. Because the new person’s resemblance to the significant other is fairly minimal, the activation of transference is relatively implicit. By contrast, although subliminal priming of significant-other faces has been used to activate relational schemas (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990), most relational schema research has had participants consciously visualize that they are interacting with an actual significant other (e.g., Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). Hence, relational schemas have often been activated by procedures that refer directly to significant others, rather than by cues in a new person with whom past relational dynamics are subsequently played out. One implication here is that it may be worthwhile to examine whether and how the consequences of activated relational schemas play out in interactions with new people.

Of interest, research on relational schemas has also shown that novel cues (e.g., auditory tones) that are repeatedly paired with elements of relational schemas can activate these schemas (e.g., Baldwin & Main, 2001). If-then contingencies can also serve as activation cues, in that harboring expectations about an interaction partner’s responses (Pierce & Lydon, 1998), or being exposed to an interaction pattern that resembles if-then dynamics with a significant other (Baldwin, Fehr, Keelan, Seidel, & Thompson, 1993), can activate relational schemas. Applied to transference, such studies suggest that in daily social encounters, transference may be elicited not only by people who resemble a significant other, but also by cues incidentally associated with a significant other, or cues reflecting the dynamics of the relationship.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory maintains that internal working models of the self and others are formed in the course of early interactions with attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Caring and responsive attachment figures foster the formation of a model of the self as competent and worthy of love, and of others as caring and available. By contrast, attachment figures who are inconsistently responsive or are neglectful give rise to insecure models—for example, a model of the self as unworthy of love and of others as uncaring.

Various points of convergence and divergence can be found between the attachment-theoretical view of the self and our conception of the relational self. First, although early infant and adult attachment research focused on attachment figures, defined as individuals who serve a specific set of functions (e.g., secure base), more recent work on adults has shown the utility of applying attachment theory to a broader circle of significant others (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1996), whether or not they meet all of the criteria for attachment figures. Thus, working models of
the self can involve attachment figures or significant others more generally, which fits our interest in the impact of significant others, attachment figures or otherwise, on the self.

On the other hand, most adult attachment research has treated attachment as an individual difference variable (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), resulting in working models of the self often being treated as if they reflect the self-concept as a whole, while their relational origins fade into the background. For example, some research has used global self-esteem as a measure of these self models (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Although some attachment experiences may become so internalized that treating them as general trait characteristics makes sense, self models that derive from interactions with significant others and designate the self in relation to these specific others are what we call relational selves. Consistent with our focus on relational selves linked to specific significant others, mounting research shows that people possess both general and relationship-specific attachment models (e.g., Klopman, Weller, Luo, & Choe, 2005; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003; Pierce & Lydon, 2001). Overlap may exist across levels, but general and relationship-specific working models have differential predictive power.

On a different note, attachment theory maintains that working models of the self and others are complementary and intertwined (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Collins & Read, 1994), implying they exert their effects in tandem. This fits well with our view that linkages exist between relational-self and significant-other knowledge, although most attachment research does not explicitly refer to such linkages. Exceptions are studies conceptualizing individual differences in attachment in terms of differences in the nature of the if-then contingencies stored in relational schemas (Baldwin et al., 1993).

Consistent with transference and relational schema findings, working models can be activated by transient or chronic sources of accessibility (e.g., Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). However, attachment theory is unique in positing that physical or psychological threats in the environment activate the attachment system, and thus working models (Bowlby, 1969/1982). A key function of attachment figures is to provide a safe haven; thus, people should seek proximity to these figures in the face of threat. Indeed, research has shown that threat-related, semantic stimuli (e.g., separation) increase the accessibility of representations of attachment figures among those securely attached (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). More pertinent to the activation of working models of the self, threat (i.e., failure feedback) has been shown to polarize the chronic self-evaluations of insecurely attached individuals (e.g., anxious-ambivalent individuals’ negative self-evaluations are exacerbated) (Mikulincer, 1998).

How might attachment and transference research inform one another? As noted, attachment working models have often been treated as an individual difference, implying that people have working models that hold across relationships. By contrast, our work has focused on specific significant others and associated relational selves. Yet the notion that people have more generalized conceptions of significant others and relational selves paves the way for widening the scope of the transference phenomenon. Namely, a new person may activate a more generalized significant-other representation (e.g., family members), thus shifting the working self-concept toward self-aspects experienced with multiple family members.

Our work on transference also informs adult attachment work. In fact, recent findings suggest that transference may constitute a mechanism by which attachment working models arise in current encounters and manage to persist over time (Andersen et al., 2006; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). That is, attachment working models may persist not only because they are activated in interactions with attachment figures themselves, but also because they are activated in encounters with new people who resemble these figures.

Including Other in the Self

The inclusion-of-other-in-self (IOS) approach (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) posits that close relationships involve the incorporation of close others (e.g., their perspectives and attributes) into the self-concept. Is our conception of the relational self akin to this? Generally no. Although the IOS approach distinguishes self-knowledge from significant-other knowledge, its core assumption is that closeness leads to self-other overlap. By contrast, we view relational-self and significant-other knowledge as linked but separate, as the relational self reflects how the self relates to, rather than internalizes, significant others. Research adopting a relational schema approach provides a useful illustration of this distinction by showing that people’s self-construals assimilate to their relationship partners on the affiliation dimension, but complement their partners on the control dimension (Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). Thus, self-conceptions may be similar to or different from conceptions of significant others, but what matters is self-other linkages—that is, how the self relates in interactions with significant others. By contrast, the IOS approach highlights overlapping aspects of the self and significant others to the exclusion of complementary ones, which may be equally relevant to the relational self.

Other points of divergence become apparent when one considers the IOS measure, which consists of seven pairs of circles, with one circle in each pair designating the self and the other circle designating a significant other (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The degree of overlap between the circles varies, with more overlap indicating greater inclusion of the other in the self. Although this measure is usually administered with respect to a specific significant other, there is some ambiguity as to which “self” is being assessed. To illustrate, research shows that entering a new relationship yields self-concept expansion, due partly to the inclusion of the relationship partner (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). In this work, participants were asked to describe themselves without reference to the relationship. Thus it is unclear whether the “self” here refers to self-conceptions in the relationship or to the global self-concept. In fact, IOS theorizing is silent on whether contextual variations, relationship or otherwise, have implications for how much others are included, whereas variations in the relational context are central to our transference-based view of the relational self.

Overall, from an IOS perspective, significant others influence the self by being incorporated into the general self-concept, whereas we argue that significant
others prompt the formation of self-aspects reflecting the self when relating to others. Thus, IOS may or may not afford predictions about how an individual will respond to significant or new others, whereas relational selves provide a direct basis for such predictions. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to consider how the two approaches might be integrated. For example, it is certainly possible for a person to interact with significant or new others in ways derived from significant others themselves; that is, relational selves may include some aspects of significant others, even though they are not defined solely by them. Or, perhaps relational-self and significant-other knowledge are especially tightly intertwined in relationships involving a high degree of inclusion.

THE RELATIONAL SELF IN THE BROADER SELF SYSTEM

Relational aspects of the self designate only one of multiple levels of self-representation. In this final section, we locate the relational self in the broader self-system by comparing and contrasting the relational self with individual and collective self-aspects.

Relational Self versus Individual and Collective Selves

The individual self refers to aspects of the self that make a person unique and separate from others (e.g., Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Turner & Onorato, 1999). Relational-self aspects may also be unique, but they are the result of connections to others rather than separation from them. Although collective-self aspects, which reflect the self as a group member (Luhmann & Crocker, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), also result from connections to others, relational selves involve connections to known significant others, whereas collective selves designate connections with individuals whose identities may or may not be known (Hogg & Turner, 1985; Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). Also, whereas activating a collective self leads one to become an interchangeable member of the group (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), activating a relational self leads people to become the self they are when with a significant other, not to become interchangeable with him or her.

In working self-concept terms, different contextual cues are likely to activate each level of self-representation. Whereas relational selves tend to be activated by cues denoting the significant other or the relationship dynamics with the other, any number of cues may activate individual self-aspects. For example, cues in an office setting may activate an array of individual self-aspects for a given person, but may not activate any specific relational self. Further, self-categorization theory argues that collective selves are activated when differences among members of one’s ingroup are perceived to be smaller than differences between the ingroup and outgroup (Turner et al., 1994). Such perceptions of intra- and intergroup differentiation have no direct bearing on the activation of relational selves.

On an empirical level, research has shown that when an outperforming friend is seen as separate from the self (i.e., when the individual self is activated), his or her performance is threatening, thus leading people to judge the friend more harshly than an outperforming stranger (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). However, when the friend is linked to the self (i.e., when a relational self is activated), his or her performance is not threatening, resulting in more favorable evaluations of the friend than the stranger. Supporting the relational–collective distinction, research has shown that people possess attachment working models of the self as a group member that are distinct from working models associated with significant others (Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). Thus, people possess distinct beliefs about and evaluations of themselves in relation to significant others versus a group.

Relations and Interplay among Selves

Are different levels of self-definition as distinct outside of the laboratory as theory and research would have it? It is certainly plausible that there is some overlap across a person’s individual, relational, and collective selves. Put differently, people may possess a set of core attributes that are ever-present in the working self-concept (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986). However, overlapping content may manifest itself in unique ways at each self level. For example, even if a person’s individual and collective selves overlapped to a degree, resource allocations may serve the individual self when this self is activated, but go against it in favor of the collective self when the latter is salient (e.g., Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). Also, different standards of comparison are used at different self levels (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994), implying that the same content may be judged differently when ascribed to different self levels.

On another note, it is intriguing to consider possible forms of interplay across self levels. For example, relationships may be of critical relevance in social identity, by facilitating perceptions of common bonds that generalize to the group level (Andersen, Downey, & Tyler, 2005). Hence, relationships may be a vehicle for forming or shifting social identities (Davis-Lipman, Tyler, & Andersen, 2007). Indeed, research has shown that activation of a significant-other representation activates the significant other’s ethnicity, which is then applied to a new person in transference (i.e., the new person is assumed to have this same ethnicity), at least when the significant other shares the perceivers’ ethnic background (Sanil & Andersen, in press). The perceivers’ own ethnic identity is also activated, leading to increased intergroup bias. Hence, there are clearly links between self levels, although more research is needed to precisely outline their interplay.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To summarize, we presented a theory of the relational self grounded in the social-cognitive phenomenon of transference. Relational selves refer to self-knowledge reflecting the person one is in relation to specific significant others. Because such self-knowledge is linked to knowledge about the corresponding significant others, when transference occurs upon activation of a significant-other
representation in an encounter with a new person, the associated relational self is activated in tandem. As a result, the working self-concept shifts to reflect the self in relation to the particular significant other—as revealed in self-definitions and self-evaluations, as well as a constellation of affective, cognitive, motivational, self-regulatory, and behavioral responses—only now in relation to a new person.

When considering our findings on relational selves, along with those coming from related theoretical approaches, what emerges is a portrait of a self that is shaped by significant others far more than is typically recognized in the Western literature on the self—until recently. As this volume shows, the past few decades have witnessed an explosion of interest in the impact of significant others on the self. Although the exact nature of relational selves, and their number and importance relative to other facets of the self, may vary across people as a function of culture, gender, and countless individual differences, the emerging consensus is that every individual possesses a repertoire of relational selves, derived from interactions with his or her significant others. In short, relational selves are as core to understanding self and identity as any other self-component.

Looking ahead, it will be important to uncover the full range of processes associated with activated relational selves within and beyond the transference context. A key aim should be to characterize the manner in which processes in the service of relational selves converge or depart from processes at other self levels. From another vantage point, viewing relational selves as core self-elements raises intriguing questions about their role in imparting coherence and clarity in the self. On a related note, future research should grapple with the degree to which people view relational selves as reflecting their “true self,” thereby conferring feelings of authenticity and self-determination. Judging from the theory and data amassed thus far, future work is likely only to strengthen the growing view that significant others exert far-ranging influences on the self in the context of significant-other relationships and day-to-day encounters with new others.

REFERENCES


