How Does External Referencing Define Sense of Self and Link to Relational Well-Being?

Amber A. Price
Brigham Young University

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How Does External Referencing Define Sense of Self
and Link to Relational Well-Being?

Amber A. Price

A thesis submitted to the faculty
of Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Chelom E. Leavitt, Chair
Erin K. Holmes
Ashley Larsen Gibby

School of Family Life
Brigham Young University

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Abstract

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Amber A. Price
School of Family Life, Brigham Young University
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As individuals develop, it is natural to reference social situations to learn about the self. Even as adults, some learning about the self comes from interactions with others. However, when adults consistently allow others to define their sense of self, their focus may shift away from connection and intimacy toward external factors. No studies have examined how allowing others to define the sense of self is associated with intimacy and satisfaction in relationships. Using structural equation modeling, this study examined whether allowing others to define the self is associated with a decrease in emotional intimacy, relational satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction and whether this relationship might be mediated by sense of self. I used a sample (n = 421) of U.S. adults in committed sexual relationships. Three common ways of allowing others to define the self—emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison—were considered relative to the relational outcomes. Gender differences in the model were also considered. Results showed a negative association between all three ways of allowing others to define the self and all three relational outcomes for men, and negative associations between emotional fusion and externalized self-perception and all three relational outcomes for women. These associations were mediated by sense of self such that those who reported allowing others to define the self, also reported a weaker sense of self. Having a strong sense of self was positively associated with emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction. This indicates that looking to outside sources to define the self may hinder intimacy and satisfaction in relationships. Further implications are discussed.
Keywords: intimacy, sexual satisfaction, sense of self, relationship satisfaction, external referencing, social comparison, emotional fusion
Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Chelom Leavitt for not only guiding me through this process, but for also letting me chart a bit of my own path. Thank you to my husband Josh for always supporting me, for working with me to balance our roles, and for believing in the power and importance of women as much as I do. And thank you to the best cohort ever. Grad school would not have been the same without you five along for the ride with me.
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How Does External Referencing Define Sense of Self and Link to Relational Well-Being?

As individuals develop, it is natural to reference social situations to learn about the self (Jaret et al., 2005; Sullivan, 1953). Through careful attention to others’ reactions and in viewing the self through the eyes of another, important truths regarding one’s sense of self and identity are gained (Cooley, 1902). Developing a self-concept through social interaction can be valuable, even essential, in shaping the self in children’s developmental years (Sullivan, 1953). Even in adulthood the self is inseparably connected to social interactions and others’ opinions inevitably continue to shape self-concept at some level (Cooley, 1902). As individuals age and their relationships and interactions become more complex, allowing others to define the self may become problematic. Frequently looking to others to define the self is negatively associated with feelings of self-worth for both men and women (Jaret et al., 2005) and may lead to identity confusion (Campbell et al., 1996). Having a clear and stable concept of one’s self is an important aspect of maintaining and forming close, intimate relationships (Tajmirriyahi & Ickes, 2020) and is associated with more satisfaction (Parise et al., 2019) and increased self-disclosure in romantic relationships (Tajmirriyahi & Ickes, 2020). Thus, looking to others to define the self may hinder the development and maintenance of stable and satisfying relationships in adulthood.

Despite evidence that lack of clarity around one’s sense of self is associated with decreased feelings of self-worth and that more clarity is associated with better relational outcomes for both men and women, no research has directly examined how allowing others to define the self in adulthood might be associated with forming and maintaining intimate relationships. To address this lack of research, I examine three common ways that individuals allow others to define the self—emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison—and consider whether individuals who rely on others to define the self may
experience decreased emotional intimacy with close others and decreased relational and sexual satisfaction in their romantic relationships. I also consider whether having a strong and clear sense of self mediates the potential negative association between allowing others to define the self and intimacy, relational, and sexual satisfaction.

**The Mediating Role of Sense of Self**

There are many measures used in defining or quantifying an individual’s feelings regarding the self. Some terms, such as self-esteem, are evaluative in nature and answer the question “How do I feel about myself?” (Campbell et al., 1996). Others, such as self-concept, focus more on identity or knowledge regarding the self and answer the question “Who am I?” The term sense of self is often used to describe having a clear sense of identity but encompasses both the self-evaluative and self-knowledge aspects of understanding the self. Having a strong sense of self is characterized by a clearly defined identity that remains consistent over time and also includes stable feelings of self-worth in addition to a sense of self-determination or agency around one’s actions (Flury & Ickes, 2007). Those with a strong sense of self have a well-defined personality, a clear sense of purpose and goals, and are able to discern their own thoughts, feelings, and opinions from others’ (Flury & Ickes, 2007; Schnarch, 2009).

The ability to maintain a strong sense of self may be diminished when allowing self-defining information to come from external sources such as societal messages, media, or others’ opinions (Wood et al., 2008). Allowing high levels of external sources to provide self-knowledge is associated with decreased positive feelings about the self and lower psychological well-being (Wood et al., 2008), as well as confusion rather than clarity about the self (Campbell et al., 1996). Reliance on outside information to define the self may become problematic because having a strong sense of self is associated with a capacity for deeper emotional intimacy, more
satisfying couple relationships, and increased sexual fulfillment (Bowen, 1978; Ferreira et al., 2012; Schnarch, 2009). This means that those who are able to free themselves from allowing others to define them and who have a clear and strong sense of self may demonstrate more capacity for close connection with others—both their romantic partners and other close associates. Prior research shows evidence of this in that having a clear identity is associated with a number of positive outcomes in relationships including increased sexual satisfaction for women (Hucker et al., 2010), increased sexual desire and couple satisfaction (Ferreira et al., 2014), and greater relational satisfaction and commitment for couples (Parise et al., 2019). For women, having a clear sense of self is associated with positive aspects of sexuality such as greater sexual satisfaction and increased sexual self-efficacy (Hucker et al., 2010). In friendships, self-disclosure is an important part of developing a close emotional connection (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and those who have a strong sense of self may be more comfortable with such self-disclosure. Having a clear sense of identity and an ability to remain consistent in one’s sense of self is important in developing and maintaining relationships, yet this strong sense of self may be threatened by allowing others to define the self.

**Gender Differences**

It is important from the beginning to acknowledge that men and women may define the self differently. A woman’s sense of self is often closely tied to her relationships and women often define who they are based on these relationships (Jordan & Surrey, 1986; Miller, 1991). According to self in relation theory, even as babies, daughters are taught to see themselves as an extension of their mother and begin to develop a concept of self grounded in their relationships with others (Surrey, 1985). Because of this, development and relationships often go hand in hand and therefore, in adulthood women may be more inclined than men to shape their sense of self
around how they believe they are perceived by others with whom they are closely connected (Acitelli et al., 1999). Preserving and maintaining relationships tends to be important to women (Miller, 1991) and this means that sometimes women may show a willingness to silence their own needs in an attempt to maintain intimacy (Jack, 1991). In doing this, they may weaken their own sense of self and clarity regarding who they are and therefore may be more prone to accepting input from others. Prior research shows that women are often more prone than men to internalizing societal standards for appearance and identity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Vartanian, 2009). Therefore, it seems likely that women more than men may be inclined to allowing others to define the self. I examine whether gender differences exist in allowing others to define the self and in how that is associated with intimacy in close relationships.

Three Common Ways of External Referencing

Emotional Fusion

One common way for individuals to define the self is by one’s relationships with others—mother, brother, daughter, friend. Though these connections with others are important (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Lampis, & Cataudella, 2019), at times some individuals move beyond a healthy amount of connection in a relationship and become fused with another such that their identity is dependent on that relationship. Depending on relationships to define the self can be problematic in that highly fused individuals are likely to become almost paralyzed in making decisions or acting of their own volition as they submit heavily to the evaluation and opinions of their partner and borrow functioning from one another (Schnarch, 2009). Emotional fusion may be associated with individuals allowing their identity to be consumed by their relationship rather than viewing the self as autonomous while still in connection with others. Emotionally fused individuals or
couples rely on each other so heavily that they become emotionally dependent and so closely entangled that any choice by one partner significantly impacts the other.

In contrast, individuals and couples who are most successful and satisfied in relationships are those who maintain a balanced closeness to others and a sense of autonomy (Ferreira et al., 2014; Lampis, 2016; Peleg, 2008). A well-differentiated individual is able to invest deeply in another without losing a sense of self, which is associated with greater authenticity and an increased capacity for intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2012; Ferreira et al., 2013).

**Potential Gender Differences in Emotional Fusion.** Gender differences may exist in both seeking out and placing value on relationships throughout the life span (Surrey, 1985). Even from infancy, the mother-daughter relationship promotes caregiving in female children (Jordan & Surrey, 1986) and women and girls may be more likely than men and boys to include others in their identity (Acitelli et al., 1999). Male babies learn to differentiate from mother while still very young and seek more autonomy from an early age (Jordan & Surrey, 1986). These differences are apparent as children age and in adults as well, with women more likely to define themselves by their relationships with others and focus heavily on caring for others (Gilligan, 1993). Societal pressures also emphasize a relationship-based identity for women with importance placed on caretaking, mothering, and forming valuable connections (Miller, 1991). Because of women’s increased focus on relationships and a higher tendency to form a sense of self around their relationships (Jordan & Surrey, 1986), women may be more prone to emotional fusion which may be negatively associated with their sense of self and intimacy in relationships.

**Externalized Self-Perception**

Another common tendency in allowing others to define the self occurs when individuals judge themselves by broad societal standards or by what they perceive as others’ expectations.
Sometimes called “reflected appraisal” (Sullivan, 1953), externalized self-perception is characterized by judging the self by what one imagines others believe about him or her. This might occur when one feels that there are certain expectations tied to a role they play or believe that others are holding them to certain idealistic standards. This concept is closely related to “the looking glass self,” which describes when an individual reflects on interactions with others and how another might perceive personal choices or behaviors, then bases views of the self around these supposed perceptions (Cooley, 1902), thus creating an externalized perception of the self. Individuals’ judgement of self is then based not on their own desires or expectations, but on what they believe others expect of them.

The concept of an externalized self-perception is also related to Jack’s (1991) self-silencing theory in which she accounted for women’s loss of self and voice and increased rates of depression. In an attempt to preserve a relationship, sometimes an individual will silence personal preferences and endeavor instead to live by idealistic standards set by others (Jack, 1991). When an individual governs personal choices and behavior based on perceived standards set by others, that individual may feel stifled and rather than increasing intimacy in a relationship, may actually lose it (Jack, 1991). These externalized self-perceptions may be based on a number of factors such as being overly concerned with and feeling responsible for others’ feelings, attempting to see the self through the eyes of another and judging the self by those imagined perceptions, allowing others’ thoughts and impression to weigh more heavily than one’s own in decision making, or attempting to live up to perceived standards of what a successful person should be capable of (Jack & Dill, 1992).

Allowing others’ standards to carry more weight than one’s own may lead to confusion relating to one’s sense of self (Campbell et al., 1996) which in turn may relate to trouble forming
intimate connections (Tajmirriyahi & Ickes, 2020), as well as decreased satisfaction in romantic relationships (Parise et al., 2019). For example, if an individual withholds self-disclosure in an attempt to conform with or preserve another’s feelings or standards, feelings of close intimacy may decrease between the partners (Tajmirriyahi & Ickes, 2020).

**Gender Differences in Externalized Self-Perception.** Though the theory of self-silencing and relying on an externalized self-perception was originally formed to describe why women have a higher tendency for depression (Jack, 1991), recent research shows that men may also be prone to similar outcomes (Duarte & Thompson, 1999; Uebelacker et al., 2003). Research is mixed on gender differences in externalizing one’s self-perception, with some suggesting that men and women, though perhaps both participating in externalizing behavior, do this in different ways. It may be that for women conforming to externalized standards is associated with a desire to preserve a relationship and consider others’ feelings (Jack, 1991) whereas for men, Jack (1999) suggests it may be more related to maintaining power in the relationship. Research is still unclear on gender differences directly relating to externalized self-perception and potential differences remain to be explored. Thus, I expect that women are likely to engage in an externalized self-perception, which may hinder their sense of self and relationships. I make no explicit prediction regarding men but consider whether externalized self-perception is associated with a weaker sense of self and decreased emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction for men as well.

**Social Comparison**

A third way that individuals sometimes allow others to define the self is by relying on social comparison as a gauge to determine who they are and how they rate against others (Festinger, 1954). Whereas having an externalized self-perception is related to judging the self
based on perceived expectations set by others and how one believes others see him or her, social comparison is directly comparing the self to another person. Whereas an externalized self-perception focuses on assumptions about others’ judgements directed towards an individual, social comparison is aimed at the individual’s assumptions about how others are living. An individual might directly compare his or her own level of achievement with another’s on things such as accomplishments, popularity, relationships, or social status, hoping to assess how well he or she measures up to others. Though Festinger theorized that most people prefer an objective source for self-knowledge and turn to comparison with others only when an objective source does not exist, more recent research indicates that social comparison theory initially underestimated the amount of comparison individuals engage in regularly (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Comparing the self to others is a central feature of human life and occurs frequently, even if individuals are unaware of doing it (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

Though it is common to use social comparison to form an understanding of the self, frequent social comparisons may be associated with a having weak sense of self (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). Those who are insecure about themselves or rely on interdependence with others are more likely to compare (Festinger, 1954) and more frequent comparison is in turn associated with increased uncertainty and insecurity about the self (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). High social comparison is about conformity with others and those who are high in comparison display less independence and less creative thinking (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

Most individuals prefer upward comparisons, or comparing to people who are slightly better off than they are (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). This comparison is especially salient if it remains private and is made to a stranger or acquaintance rather than close family or friends. This may be desirable in that it can stretch one’s capacity and increase desired skills. However,
because comparing with someone who is better off can be uncomfortable, downward comparison, or putting oneself above another, provides opportunity for a person to feel better than others. Those who frequently use social comparison are also more likely to emotionally distance themselves from close or intimate relationships to avoid such downward comparisons by others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

High levels of social comparison and the resulting possibility of a weaker sense of self may be associated with decreased relational satisfaction. In examining social comparison in the context of relationships, Smith LeBeau and Buckingham (2008) found that those high in a tendency for comparing their own romantic relationship with others were more likely to have low self-esteem, anxious attachments, and more relationship insecurity. The same study also found that relationship comparison was related to lower levels of intimacy, commitment, and relational satisfaction. A tendency to compare with others opens one up to viewing alternatives as enticing and superior to one’s current situation, especially because others typically disclose the more positive aspects of their relationship, personality, or experiences, meaning the comparison is upward.

**Gender Differences in Social Comparison.** In the early decades of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), most believed that men and women engage in social comparison in much the same way and therefore, gender differences in social comparison have rarely been examined (Guimond & Chatard, 2014). More recently however, both in the development of a social comparison scale (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and in examining cross-cultural patterns of social comparison between genders, women were found to have higher levels of social comparison orientation (Guimond et al., 2007). Having an interdependent self is highly correlated with having a social comparison orientation (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), therefore, it
seems likely that women, who are typically more prone to forming a sense of self through their relationships with others (Jordan & Surrey, 1986), might be more likely to engage in social comparison. Though there is still only limited research into gender differences in social comparison, it seems probable that women’s social comparison may be more likely to be related to sense of self and intimacy and relational outcomes than men’s.

**Current Study**

Allowing others to define the self can lead to confusion and weakness in one’s sense of self and potential decreases in an individual’s capacity for intimacy. In this study, after controlling for race, age, and education, I examine three common ways that individuals allow others to define the self—emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison—and consider whether increased levels of each of these is associated with a weakened sense of self and then examine whether sense of self is associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction and emotional intimacy.

**Hypotheses:**

H1: Increased levels of emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, or social comparison will be associated with a decrease in emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction.

H2: These associations will be mediated by sense of self such that increases in allowing others to define the self through emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, or social comparison will be associated with a weaker sense of self. Sense of self will be positively associated with emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction, meaning that having a weakened sense of self will be associated with decreased intimacy and relational and sexual satisfaction.
H3: Women will have stronger associations with emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison than men which in turn may be related to stronger associations with decreased emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction for women.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study were collected through online surveys using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). To be eligible for this study, participants had to be adults (18+) in a committed sexual relationship for at least the last two years who were not pregnant at the time of the survey. All participants in this study were located in the United States. This data included 421 observations from surveys using previously validated measures regarding the self (i.e., self-esteem, sense of self, body image) in the context of relationships (i.e., sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction). Surveys took approximately 10 minutes to complete and participants were compensated $0.50. Participants gave consent prior to completing the survey and all Institutional Review Board guidelines were followed. In order to ensure accuracy, two attention questions were included in the survey (e.g., *If you are reading this question, please select strongly agree*) and participants who failed to correctly respond to the attention questions or who did not complete the survey were not included.

Approximately half of the participants (211) were women and 209 were men. The average age of women in this sample was 37.71 years ($SD = 11.69$) and for men it was 36.73 ($SD = 15.84$) with participant ages ranging from 20-72. The majority of participants were married (61% of women, 65% of men), with others single but in a committed relationship (25% of women, 20% of men), cohabiting (11% of women, 12% of men), and 4% of women and 3% engaged or in another committed relationship. The participants were mostly White (76% of men,
80% of women), with Black (11% of men, 8% of women), Native American (6% of men and women), Latinx (4% of men, 5% of women) 5% Asian-American (5% of men, 3% of women), and 2% of men and women reporting mixed, biracial, or other races. The majority of participants completed a 4-year degree (58% of men, 53% of women) with 19% of men and 24% of women having completed a 2-year degree or some college, 21% of men and 14% of women with a master’s degree or higher, and 2% of men and 9% of women having a high school education or less.

Measures

Measures of Allowing Others to Define the Self

Emotional Fusion. Emotional fusion was measured using the Fusion with Others subscale (11 items; \( \alpha = .86 \) women; .86 men) from the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). This scale is used to assess the level of fusion or participant’s reliance on relationships with others to form and maintain a self-concept. Participants answered questions such as “I feel a need for approval from virtually everyone in my life” on a scale ranging from 1 (not very true of me) to 6 (very true of me). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating more emotional fusion.

Externalized Self-Perception. As a subscale of the Silencing the Self Scale (Jack & Dill, 1992), externalized self-perception measures an individual’s tendency to judge the self by others’ standards. This measure includes 6 items (\( \alpha = .86 \) women; .82 men) that assess how an individual allows others’ standards to dictate their own feelings and actions. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items include, “I tend to judge myself by how I think other people see me” and “I find it hard to know what I think and feel because I spend a lot of time thinking
about how other people are feeling.” Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicate higher levels of externalized self-perception.

**Social Comparison.** Social comparison was measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Scale (6 items; $\alpha = .89$ women; .85 men; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Participants responded to statements such as “I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life” on a scale ranging from 1 (I disagree strongly) to 5 (I agree strongly). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating more social comparison.

**Outcome Measures**

**Sense of Self.** Sense of self was measured using The Sense of Self Scale (12 items; $\alpha = .89$ women; .86 men) (Flury & Ickes, 2007). This scale measures having a weak sense of self versus a strong sense of self with participants responding to questions such as, "It's hard for me to figure out my own personality, interests, and opinions" on a scale ranging from 1 (very uncharacteristic of me) to 4 (very characteristic of me). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of self.

**Emotional Intimacy.** Emotional intimacy was measured using the Emotional Intimacy Scale (5 items; $\alpha = .89$ women; .85 men; Sinclair & Dowdy, 2005). Participants were asked to think of their closest friend or family member when responding to questions such as, “I can openly share my deepest thoughts and feelings with this person” on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating a greater capacity for emotional intimacy.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Couple Satisfaction Index (4 items; $\alpha = .91$ women; .89 men; CSI, Funk & Rogge, 2007). Participants
answered questions such as, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, in your relationship.” This question uses a 7-point scale, from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect). They also responded to two questions about their satisfaction with the relationship such as "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?" on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (completely). Finally, participants will answer a single question "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner" on a scale from 1 (not at all true) to 6 (completely true). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction.

**Sexual Satisfaction.** Sexual satisfaction was measured using the short version of the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (12 items, $\alpha = .95$ women; .93 men; Štulhofer et al., 2010). Participants were asked to rate their sexual satisfaction on statements such as, “The variety of my sexual activity” on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied). Items were averaged to create a mean score with higher scores indicating greater sexual satisfaction.

**Control Variables**

This model controlled for age, education, and race (White/Non-White comparison) and compared outcomes by gender.

**Analytic Strategy**

Analysis for this study was conducted using Stata 16 (StataCorp, 2019). Scale variables were used in this study due to sample size restrictions. All variables had good reliability as well as normal distributions with no outliers and no problems with collinearity. There was minimal missing data (1 case), so listwise deletion was used. The model is saturated (zero degrees of freedom), so model fit measures cannot be provided.
Significant negative correlations were found for all predictor variables, fusion (women -.61; men -.64), externalized self-perception (women -.64; men -.64), and social comparison (women -.48; men -.62), with sense of self (see Table 1). Sense of self was also significantly and positively correlated with all three outcome variables, emotional intimacy (women .45; men .30), relationship satisfaction (women .22; men .42), sexual satisfaction (women .28; men .15).

This model estimated the relationship between emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison with three relational outcomes, emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction, and examined possible indirect effects of sense of self (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In order to examine multiple outcomes and test for potential indirect effects, structural equation modeling was used to perform a path analysis. Gender was used as a moderator of the full model in this analysis. This model also controlled for age, race (as a dichotomous variable of White and Non-White), and education. Because this model examined indirect effects, the model was estimated with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstraps. Prior to estimating the full model, structural invariance was tested for and poor model fit was found if constrained, so the structural model was allowed to vary across groups. Mean differences were also calculated using $t$-tests for each variable to assess gender differences in each and a post hoc Wald test was estimated to compare outcomes by gender.

**Results**

Mean comparison of all variables revealed several significant differences between men and women. Sense of self was higher for women (women $M = 4.40$; men $M = 4.33$; $t(418) = -2.09$, $p \leq .05$), as was emotional intimacy (women $M = 6.14$; men $M = 5.62$; $t(418) = -2.01$, $p \leq .05$). Men’s sexual satisfaction was higher than women’s (women $M = 3.99$; men $M = 4.92$; $t(418) = 1.99$, $p \leq .05$). (See Table 1 for full results.)
Results of the path analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between all three predictor variables and sense of self for men (emotional fusion $\beta = -0.27, p < .001$; externalized self-perception $\beta = -0.30, p < .001$; social comparison $\beta = -0.32, p < .001$) (Sense of self $R^2 = 0.58$). (For all significant paths and $r^2$ values for men see Figure 1.) For women, emotional fusion ($\beta = -0.29, p < .001$) and externalized self-perception ($\beta = -0.39, p < .001$) were negatively associated with sense of self ($R^2 = 0.54$). (For all significant paths and $r^2$ values for women see Figure 2.) All outcome variables were positively related to sense of self for both men and women. Sense of self was positively associated with emotional intimacy for both men ($\beta = 0.48, p < .001$) and women ($\beta = 0.43, p < .001$), as well as with relationship satisfaction for men ($\beta = 0.59, p < .001$) and women ($\beta = 0.33, p < .01$) and sexual satisfaction for men ($\beta = 0.39, p < .001$) and women ($\beta = 0.30, p < .001$). For women, age was also a significant predictor of sense of self ($\beta = 0.23, p < .001$).

A number of significant indirect effects with sense of self were found as well. For men, all indirect paths were significant (see Table 2). Fusion predicted negative associations with emotional intimacy ($\beta = -0.13, p < .001$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.16, p < .001$), and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.10, p < .05$) with the indirect effect of sense of self. Likewise, externalized self-perception was negatively associated with emotional intimacy ($\beta = -0.14, p < .01$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.18, p < .001$), sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.12, p < .05$). Finally, social comparison was also negatively associated with emotional intimacy ($\beta = -0.15, p < .001$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.19, p < .001$), sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.12, p < .01$).

For women, emotional fusion predicted small negative effects on emotional intimacy ($\beta = -0.13, p < .01$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.09, p < .05$), and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -0.09, p < .05$) as an indirect effect with sense of self. Externalized self-perception also predicted negative effects on emotional intimacy ($\beta = -0.17, p < .001$), relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -0.13, p < .05$),
and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$) as an indirect effect with sense of self. No significant indirect paths were found with social comparison for women.

The model also examined direct paths between all three predictors and all three outcomes and revealed that (even with indirect paths in the model), emotional fusion was positively associated with emotional intimacy ($\beta = .23, p < .01$) and sexual satisfaction ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) for men. Emotional fusion was positively associated with emotional intimacy for women ($\beta = .28, p < .001$). Externalized self-perception was negatively associated with emotional intimacy ($\beta = -.23, p < .05$) and sexual satisfaction for women ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$) as well. Several additional direct paths were found for control variables. White men reported, on average, less emotional intimacy ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$) and both White men and White women were, on average, less satisfied with their sexual relationship (both at $\beta = -12, p < .05$). For women, age positively predicted emotional intimacy ($\beta = .13, p < .05$) but negatively predicted sexual satisfaction ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$).

In order to compare how these outcomes varied by gender, I used a post hoc Wald test for comparison of model. This test indicated significant differences between men and women for social comparison on sense of self ($\chi^2 = 12.82, p < .001$), with men having stronger associations. Though men and women’s mean scores on social comparison were similar, social comparison was negatively associated with sense of self and relational outcomes for men but not for women. Significant differences were also apparent for age on sense of self ($\chi^2 = 10.54, p = .001$), with having a strong sense of self increasing more for women as they age. Additionally, there was a significant gender difference associated with age and sexual satisfaction ($\chi^2 = 6.44, p = .01$), with women’s satisfaction decreasing more with age.
**Discussion**

This study examined three common ways that men and women allow others to define the self—emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, and social comparison—and how each of these might be associated with emotional intimacy, relationship and sexual satisfaction. Additionally, this study considered whether these associations might be mediated by sense of self as well as how gender differences might be associated with allowing others to define the self and the related outcomes. As predicted, I found that allowing others to define the self is associated with decreases in intimacy and satisfaction in relationships and that this was mediated by a decrease in sense of self for those who reported higher levels of allowing others to define the self. I hypothesized that women would be more inclined to externalizing their self-perception, engaging in social comparison, and using emotional fusion to secure relationships; however, these associations also existed for men and in some cases were stronger than women’s associations. Specifically, for men all three common ways of allowing others to define the self were negatively associated with sense of self and for women emotional fusion and externalized self-perception were negatively associated with sense of self. Sense of self was positively associated with all three relational outcomes for both men and women.

These findings build on prior research indicating that when individuals look to external sources such as other people’s performance, expectations or opinions to define their worth, their sense of self can be weakened (e.g., Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Campbell et al., 1996; Flury & Ickes, 2007). For example, those who engage in high levels of social comparison are also likely to either rely heavily on others to help them feel acceptable or to distance themselves from others for fear of not measuring up (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). The findings from the current study also corroborate previous research that shows that the amount of clarity or confidence an individual
feels toward the self is closely tied to satisfaction and intimacy in relationships (e.g., Hucker et al., 2010, Ferreira et al., 2014; Parise et al., 2019). In this study, those with a stronger sense of self reported higher levels of relational and sexual satisfaction and emotional intimacy. What this study contributes to the literature is a link between using external sources of self-definition such as comparing the self with others or judging the self by idealistic societal standards and associated negative relationship outcomes. Previous research showed links between focusing on external qualities and decreased relationship connections (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and this study adds evidence to that work. As men and women allow others to validate and define their sense of self, intimacy and satisfaction with their romantic and sexual relationship diminish. Additionally, in examining gender differences, unexpected associations with allowing others to define the self and relationship outcomes were found for men, indicating that this may be an important area for both men and women to address.

Emotional Fusion

Emotional fusion was negatively associated with all relational outcomes for both men and women when mediated by sense of self. However, without accounting for sense of self, emotional fusion was positively associated with emotional intimacy for both men and women and with sexual satisfaction for men. This indicates that when an individual allows fusion in a relationship to weaken the sense of self, there may be negative relationship outcomes associated (Schnarch, 2009), but perhaps if the fusion is not weakening sense of self, the outcomes are positive. Additionally, the individuals examined in this study reported higher than average satisfaction in their relationships and this may account for positive relationship outcomes associated with emotional fusion.
It may also be that emotional fusion measured something similar to feelings of secure attachment, making the direct effect of fusion potentially positive in some relationship factors. Some couples form a close connection through sharing many common interests and feelings, and this close sharing may be related to increased feelings of intimacy with their partner (Morris, 1982). Typically, however, emotional fusion differs from secure attachment and is perceived as an inability to function without approval from a partner (Schnarch, 2009). When this is the case, as these results indicate, it may weaken one’s sense of self. Because emotional fusion was negatively associated with sense of self, it seems likely that when individuals define the self by their relationships rather than merely seeking connection with their partner, they may be more likely to also experience decreased satisfaction in relationships and intimacy.

**Externalized Self-Perception**

Externalized self-perception was negatively associated with all three relational outcomes for both men and women when mediated by sense of self. For women, externalized self-perception also showed a direct negative association with emotional intimacy and sexual satisfaction. These results indicate that allowing others to define the self through externalized expectations for behavior is related to a decrease in an individual’s capacity for intimacy and satisfaction in relationships. Originally conceptualized as part of her self-silencing theory, Jack (1991) theorized that externalizing ones’ self-perception, though often done with an intent to preserve relationships, was likely to decrease an individual’s capacity for intimacy in close relationships. This theory supports this study’s results. A focus on others’ perceptions and judgements may distract a person from remaining present and aware in a relationship. Additionally, a person’s perceptions of others’ expectations are rarely accurate (Jaret et al., 2005), and so attempting to live up to these perceptions is not only difficult, but often
impossible. This may discourage intimate disclosure for fear of not meeting perceived external standards, possibly leading to less connection and satisfaction in close relationships. Though Jack’s (1991) initial conception of externalizing self-perception was directed at women, men in this study also showed a weakened sense of self and decreased relational satisfaction and intimacy associated with externalizing their self-perception as well and reported similar rates of this as women. With society highly connected today through media and technology, it is easy to adopt others’ standards and expectations because they feel persistent and persuasive (Coyne et al., 2013). Focusing less on judging the self by others’ standards and more on doing what feels right to an individual may help strengthen relationships and intimacy.

Social Comparison

Social comparison was the only predictor in the model that differed significantly for men and women. Though men and women reported comparable rates of social comparison, a negative association with sense of self was found only for men; there was no significant association between social comparison and sense of self or any of the outcomes for women. This stronger association for men with social comparison and their sense of self and relational outcomes differed from what was hypothesized. Though there is limited research into gender differences in social comparison, some previous research found that women tend to be more prone to social comparison than men (e.g., Guimond et al., 2007), so this finding was unforeseen. Both men and women engaged in social comparison at similar levels, but for men, this social comparison was negatively associated with their sense of self and relationships in a way that somehow it was not for women. This indicates an important difference in either the purpose or process of social comparison for men and women It may be that the act of comparison for women is directed more towards others’ expectations for things like decisions and behavior (having an externalized self-
perception) rather than a direct comparison of their own performance to the actions or choices of similar others and therefore their comparison is more encompassed in measuring externalized self-perception for women. It may also be that women’s form of comparison is motivated by a desire to build connections (Jordan & Surrey, 1986) whereas men’s comparisons are directed towards seeking status (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007) and so the outcomes are for each are different. This finding should be interpreted with caution and future research should further examine social comparison in both men and women to better understand when it is occurring, where it is directed, and its implications with the self and relationships.

For men social comparison was associated with a decrease in intimacy and relationship and sexual satisfaction, along with a weakened sense of self. Modern conceptualizations of masculinity may be inherently comparison drive. Men are often socialized to be achievement-oriented and competitive (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2011) and this may be related to a higher tendency for basing a sense of self around social comparison. Additionally, modern conceptualizations of masculinity are changing (Phillips, 2006) and may feel ambiguous for some men. For example, whereas in the past men’s roles in the family were primarily directed at providing an income, today they are expected to take a more active role in things like fatherhood, and this may leave some men unsure of their own performance. This uncertainty might drive a need to compare with others to get a sense of how their own performance is measuring up and could include fathers looking to the mother to assess their own parenting performance.

Similar to the experience of externalized self-perception, if a man is too focused on comparison, he may be less present in the relationship and less willing to share authenticity and vulnerabilities for fear of being seen as less successful than similar others. His focus may move to external indicators of his worth and comparisons such as his success at work or how masculine
he feels in comparison to other men and this outward focus could hinder relationship satisfaction for himself and his partner (Rochlen, & Mahalik, 2004).

**Mediation Role of Sense of Self**

Having a strong sense of self was positively associated with emotional intimacy, relational satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction for both men and women, indicating that feelings of self are closely connected with successful relationships. Having a strong sense of self is characterized not only by having positive feelings towards the self and a stable concept of the self, but by forming this view of the self without a need for validation from outside others (Flury & Ickes, 2007; Schnarch, 2009). Allowing others to define the self may weaken one’s sense of self because an individual becomes reliant on others’ input and endorsement in order to maintain positive self-feelings and a clear self-concept. In nearly all areas considered in this model, allowing others to define the self this was related to a weakened sense of self (the only exception being social comparison for women), and a weakened self was associated with less satisfaction in relationships and less intimacy. In contrast, those with a strong sense of self are able to disconnect from a need for validation and instead make choices and behave in ways that feel genuine and authentic. As these results indicate, freeing oneself from being defined by others may be related to increased satisfaction in sexual and romantic relationships and a greater capacity for intimacy.

This study provides initial evidence of how allowing external referencing may impede individuals’ intimacy and satisfaction in romantic and sexual relationships. The results of this study indicate that both men and women would benefit from examining and acknowledging areas in which they allow others to define who they are and then challenging these aspects of their life. Because emotional intimacy and satisfying romantic or sexual relationships require a
willingness for vulnerability and being authentic (Wood et al., 2008), strong and consistent feelings of self-worth and maintaining a clear identity are important. If an individual fears that he or she will not measure up or will not be accepted by another or if an individual is unclear in his or her own identity, the likelihood of allowing another to be in close connection diminishes. Having a strong sense of self allows individuals to feel confident in who they are, even while acknowledging shortcomings and weaknesses, and thus feel more comfortable engaging in close connections with others (Schnarch, 2009). An important part of strengthening one’s sense of self is simply becoming aware of one’s use of outside sources of influence in defining the self. When an individual recognizes ways in which he or she engages in emotional fusion, externalized self-perception, or social comparison and makes an effort to strengthen the sense of self by relying less on these outside influences, a greater capacity for intimacy and increased relationship and sexual satisfaction are likely to follow.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study had several limitations. The sample was relatively small, obtained through online convenience sampling, and not nationally representative, which limit the generalizability of the findings (Szolnoki & Hoffmann, 2013). Participants tended to be well-educated and were primarily White; therefore, these findings may not be generalizable to more diverse samples. Additionally, the participants reported higher than typical satisfaction in relationships which may have provided different outcomes than might be seen in less satisfied couples (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010). Further research could address these questions in a more diverse and representative population as well as with couples who are struggling in their relationship. The data collected included individuals in relationships, but future studies could consider a larger sample and focus on dyadic data. Dyadic data would allow assessment of associations relating to
definitions of the self occurs within a partnership and whether partners influence each other’s sense of self. Finally, these data were cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish causation. Longitudinal research could consider whether these associations occur over time and whether helping individuals address their tendency to allow others to define the self might improve relationships and intimacy.

Conclusion

For adults, relying on external referencing to define the self, though common, was associated with a weakened sense of self and with a decreased capacity for intimacy as well as decreased relational and sexual satisfaction. Individuals who want to improve their intimacy and relational connections can seek to recognize areas in which they are allowing others to define the self and challenge these. As the sense of self is strengthened and becomes increasingly independent from a need for validation and constant input from others, more authenticity and deeper connection in relationships may be achieved.
References


https://doi.org/10.1891/106137405780954415


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https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490903100561


https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520911131


Table 1

*Men’s and Women’s Zero-order Correlations, Means, and Mean Differences for all Variables*

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<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>.60***</td>
<td>- .61***</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
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<td>—</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>- .64***</td>
<td>-.34***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Social Comparison</td>
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<td>- .48***</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
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<td>4. Sense of Self</td>
<td>- .64***</td>
<td>- .62***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>- .64***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.28***</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Emotional Intimacy</td>
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<td>.20**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Rel. Satisfaction</td>
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<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td>.49***</td>
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Men’s Mean (SD)

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>3.35</th>
<th>3.40</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.19)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.25)</td>
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Women’s Mean (SD)

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3.45</th>
<th>2.84</th>
<th>3.25</th>
<th>4.40</th>
<th>6.14</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.18)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.23)</td>
<td>(.21)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*t*-values

|              | 1.23  | 1.66  | -.07  | -2.09*| -2.01*| 1.49  | 1.99* |

*Note. Men’s values are reported below the diagonal and women’s values are reported above. Ex. Self-perception = Externalized Self-perception. Rel. Satisfaction = Relationship Satisfaction. Sex. Satisfaction = Sexual Satisfaction*

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .00*
Table 2  Decomposition of Effects Table with Sense of Self Mediating all Structural Equation Modeling Paths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Direct Effects</th>
<th>Indirect Effects</th>
<th>Total Effects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Men:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion to Emotional Intimacy</td>
<td>.23** (.05)</td>
<td>-.13*** (.02)</td>
<td>.10 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.05 (.07)</td>
<td>-.16*** (.04)</td>
<td>-.11 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.38*** (.07)</td>
<td>-.10* (.03)</td>
<td>.28** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Emotional Intimacy</td>
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<td>-.14*** (.04)</td>
<td>-.25*** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.16* (.08)</td>
<td>-.18*** (.06)</td>
<td>-.02 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.13 (.06)</td>
<td>-.12* (.04)</td>
<td>-.25*** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Emotional Intimacy</td>
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<td>-.15*** (.03)</td>
<td>-.03 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.05 (.08)</td>
<td>-.19*** (.05)</td>
<td>-.14 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.07 (.08)</td>
<td>-.12** (.04)</td>
<td>-.05 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion to Emotional Intimacy</td>
<td>.28** (.05)</td>
<td>-.13** (.02)</td>
<td>.15 (.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fusion to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
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<td>-.09* (.04)</td>
<td>.05 (.10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fusion to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.20 (.08)</td>
<td>-.09* (.03)</td>
<td>.11 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Emotional Intimacy</td>
<td>-.23* (.06)</td>
<td>-.17*** (.03)</td>
<td>-.39*** (.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.07 (.12)</td>
<td>-.13* (.06)</td>
<td>-.20 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Self. to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
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<td>-.12* (.04)</td>
<td>-.37*** (.09)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Emotional Intimacy</td>
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<td>-.01 (.02)</td>
<td>.02 (.05)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Rel. Satisfaction</td>
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<td>-.01 (.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soc. Comp. to Sex. Satisfaction</td>
<td>.01 (.09)</td>
<td>-.01 (.02)</td>
<td>.00 (.09)</td>
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</table>


* \( p \leq .05; ** p \leq .01; *** p \leq .001 \)
Figure 1

*Significant Paths for Men*

\[ \chi^2(0) = 0.00, p < .001. \] Only paths for significant standardized weights are shown. Indirect paths are represented with a solid line and direct paths with a dotted line. Residuals of endogenous variables are correlated but not shown for parsimony.

\[ ^* p < .05 \quad ^{**} p < .01 \quad ^{***} p < .001. \]
Figure 2

Significant Paths for Women

Note. $X^2(0) = 0.00, p < .001$. Only paths for significant standardized weights are shown. Indirect paths are represented with a solid line and direct paths with a dotted line. Residuals of endogenous variables are correlated but not shown for parsimony.

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001.