
The Special Bond Behind Every Brilliant Idea



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The way we view ourselves shapes the way we develop and connect with our own ideas.

We have all experienced that sudden stroke of genius: A remarkable idea pops into our head and our whole body begins to tingle.

J.K. Rowling describes the visceral reaction she had when she first came up with the idea for the story of Harry Potter: “I’d never had an idea that gave me such a physical response ... it was that incredibly elated feeling you get when you’ve just met someone with whom you might eventually fall in love.”

But just as we fall in love with an idea, so the doubt creeps in. We begin to question how it will pan out, what others will think and if it is even feasible. Eventually, we dismiss the idea and pursue a safer solution.

Novel ideas depart from current practice and have the highest potential for creativity. **Prior research** suggests that we have an implicit bias against our novel ideas, and favour concrete ideas that offer more certainty.

In the brainstorming process we are likely to rule out **novel ideas** that seem risky or hard to envision. But if nobody kept their initial, unique ideas alive, we would likely miss the next technological innovation or creative masterpiece.

This led us to the question how people, like Rowling, can overcome this bias against novelty, and under what conditions they select their more novel ideas early in the creative process.

In our **recent research**, published in *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, we explored whether and when people feel attached to their novel ideas. We found that the way we define ourselves can explain the extent to which we feel attached to, and select, our most novel ideas.

Can people feel attached to abstract ideas?

People form strong emotional connections with products and brands that affirm key elements in themselves. This connection to the self is an important aspect of our attachment to objects, along with affection (warm feelings akin to love) and passion (feeling captivated and excited).

Just as people can get attached to tangible objects that represent them, they can feel attached to ideas that communicate who they are. We posit that people develop attachments to novel ideas that affirm how they view themselves.

However, not all people construe themselves in the same way. **Early research indicates** that people define themselves either as an independent entity, or in terms of their connections with others (interdependent). Those with an independent self-construal see themselves as distinct and autonomous, compared to those who consider themselves to be more collectivistic.

We found that the way people view themselves shapes the way they fall in love with different types of ideas. Those who define themselves more individually may become attached to more novel ideas that affirm their independent thinking and divergence. Conversely, those who define themselves by their social groups are less likely to feel strongly about ideas that deviate from existing norms or the status quo.

Attachment to ideas that affirm the self

We collected data on participants of three technology hackathons to test whether participants with high independent self-construal became more attached to their novel ideas than those who presented themselves as interdependent of others. In these competitions, entrepreneurs were invited to suggest ideas for a new venture and then develop them for a few days.

We asked participants to describe their initial idea, evaluate its novelty and practicality, and report their self-construal and attachment to the idea. In line with our theory, we found that the more people construe themselves independently of others, the more attached they feel to their novel ideas.

However, individuals can present themselves as either independent or interdependent depending on the situation they are in. To explore this further, we manipulated the way participants thought of themselves by getting them to reflect on how they were either unique or similar to others.

We conducted three experiments with the fitness, travel and food industries and asked participants to come up with initial ideas for a new piece of equipment. We then primed participants to think of themselves as either an individual or part of a collective by asking a series of leading questions.

Results suggest that when a person's independent self is more salient, they feel attached to and select their more novel ideas for further development. These findings were robust across all three studies.

If you love your idea, don't let it go

Managers and mentors can adopt this same technique to shape the way employees think about themselves in a certain situation. By creating an environment where people feel valued for their **unique values and differences**, managers can motivate employees to select and develop novel ideas.

While prior **studies indicate** that collectivistic cultures are less capable of generating novel ideas, our findings suggest that the issue is not in coming up with ideas, but rather in the selection of those ideas. This is because people in such environments will choose to pursue socially acceptable ideas and not the riskier, novel ones.

If a manager encourages employees to harness their individuality and reflect on what makes them distinct, this may lead to the pursuit of more novel ideas, even in a highly collectivistic context.

Individuals can also overcome the tendency to devalue their own novel ideas by focusing on ideas they connect with, rather than ones that may have a better chance of success. When choosing from a pool of initial ideas, people should reflect on their values and experiences and what novelty they can bring to the world.

Rowling persisted with her extraordinary idea despite [being rejected by 12 different publishing houses](#). If she hadn't felt an intense attachment to this idea, the universe of Harry Potter would never have existed.

Similarly, if you've fallen in love with an idea and feel a strong connection to it, don't give up on it too soon. Who knows what brilliance you might breed if you keep your idea alive.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/special-bond-behind-every-brilliant-idea>

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About the research

["Love at First Insight: An Attachment Perspective on Early-Phase Idea Selection"](#) is published in *Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.