

Running Head: GOAL SIMILARITY

Interdependent Goals and Relationship Conflict

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Abstract

Because of the high interdependence inherent to romantic relationships (Kelley, 1979), every day brings opportunities for coordination or conflict. Past research on conflict in romantic relationships has emphasized the role of important individual differences in relationship dynamics in producing relationship conflict, such as attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Philips, 1996). Little work has directly examined the core tenets of Kelley and Thibaut's (1978) theorizing about the effects of outcome interdependence in producing conflicts within romantic relationships, with most of the interdependence work on conflict focusing on negotiations and trust games (see Surra & Longstreth, 1990, for an exception). In the current research, we examine the role of similar versus dissimilar goal pursuits in interpersonal conflict in romantic relationships. In five studies using experimental and correlational methods, we test the effects of perceived and actual similarities in personal goals on everyday relationship conflict, demonstrating that dissimilar personal goals can lead to increased rates of fighting and increased negativity in response to common disagreements.

In close relationships, partners' outcomes are mutually dependent. This extensive everyday interdependence is what brings much of what people desire from relationships – intimacy, understanding, support, and stability – but is also what brings much of what people fear – hurt, pain, obstruction, and strife. From its very inception, Interdependence Theory has explicitly connected interdependence and the likely occurrence of interpersonal conflict (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), noting that with greater interdependence comes greater opportunities for partners to both facilitate and obstruct each other's goals. If individual goal pursuits are enmeshed in the everyday interdependence of romantic relationships, then it may be fruitful for the understanding of both self-regulatory and relationship processes to elucidate the relations of one partner's goals to the other's. In the current research, we suggest that the similarity of the partners' personal goals – career goals, financial goals, health and fitness goals, etc. – may be an important factor in predicting both individuals' progress on their goals as well as relationship coordination, compatibility, and conflict.

In this chapter, we present recent findings examining the links between goal similarity and relationship conflict, testing the hypothesis that romantic partners who pursue dissimilar personal goals experience more conflict in their relationship. Dissimilar personal goals are likelier to be incompatible goals, interfering with each other's progress, and we thus suggest that dissimilar personal pursuits will lead to more conflict in the relationship overall.

A huge body of research has tested the association between similarity and relationship satisfaction within romantic relationships across a variety of characteristics, including personality traits, attitudes, values, and religiosity. Although the findings have been mixed and many studies have suffered from data-analytic weaknesses that limit their interpretability (Griffin, Murray, & Gonzalez, 1999; see also Karney & Bradbury's 1995 review), the most often reported finding is that similar partners are more satisfied partners (e.g., Gaunt, 2006; Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Less work has directly examined conflict as an outcome, but some findings have suggested that similarity also reduces the occurrence of everyday

conflict (Surra & Longstreth, 1990) and many authors have posited that reduced conflict is one route through which the similarity-satisfaction effect may occur.

Most of the research to date on similarity has examined personality traits and attitudes, with no studies on similar personal goal pursuits per se. However, several studies have examined similarity in characteristics related to personal goals, finding that similar activity preferences, at least in some domains, predict reduced conflict and increased relationship satisfaction (Surra & Longstreth, 1990), and that similar needs for autonomy and affiliation predict higher reports of marital adjustment (Meyer & Pepper, 1977).

Thus, building on prior work, we explored the influence of similar personal goals on the frequency and intensity of relationship conflict. Why would dissimilar personal goals generate conflict within close relationships? Holmes and Murray (1996), in their review of research on conflict in relationships, suggest that one major cause of relationship conflict is that partners lack understanding of each other's "untransformed" preferences—that is, the preferences they'd possess in the absence of external influence. Before partners can decide how to act in a given situation, they must understand their partner's preferences in the situation (Kelley, 1979; Messick & Brewer, 1983), and unfortunately, partners are known to be quite inaccurate when it comes to perceiving each other's preferences (Kenny, 1994). Inaccuracies are thought to stem both from people's tendencies to project their own preferences onto their partners (a tendency that is even likelier to happen with close relationships, because people assume more similarity), and from people's overreliance on partners' past overt behaviors as cues for their preferences. Overt behaviors can often be misleading reflections of people's real motivations, both because people behave in line with "transformed" motivations (i.e., they alter their preferences to better suit their partner's); Holmes & Murray, 1996) and because people often fail to behave in line with their goals, due to self-control failures (Baumeister, 1998). If partners base their beliefs about each

other's preferences based on what they see in their partner's behaviors, then, they may well miss the mark when it comes to understanding what their partners really want.

We suggest that both of these types of misunderstandings are likelier to happen when partners hold dissimilar personal goals. Partners who pursue similar goals may have no better knowledge of their partner's preferences, but their assumption of similarity will be well-founded, and thus, they will project accurate preferences onto their partners. Similarly, when partners have similar goals, past behavior is less likely to reflect transformed motivations and more likely to reflect each partner's actual untransformed interests, simply because there is less need for transformation when both partners share the same goals. In contrast, partners with dissimilar personal goals will be likelier to make particularly inaccurate projections, and to have behaved in ways that don't reflect their untransformed interests, out of desire to compromise or get along with each other.

These perspective-taking issues are one possible route through which dissimilar personal goals could generate relationship conflict. It is also possible that partners who hold dissimilar personal goals may obstruct each other's goal progress, which may directly lead to negative emotions and conflict (Berscheid, 1983; 1991; Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). When goals are obstructed, people tend to feel frustrated with each other (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001), and may avoid each other and seek more independence (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), all of which would promote conflict. In contrast, partners who hold similar personal goals may (whether intentionally or incidentally) facilitate each other's goal progress, which in turn may directly lead to positive emotions, closeness, and cooperation (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Finally, another route through which goal similarity may impact conflict is through the nature of everyday interactions within relationships. If partners are pursuing similar goals, their interactions may be smoother and more efficient than interactions between partners who are pursuing dissimilar goals. If so, they may experience more harmony and synchrony,

which again may promote positive, cooperative responses. In contrast, if partners are pursuing dissimilar goals, their interactions may be discordant and inefficient, which may lead to more conflict.

In this chapter, we describe several studies – correlational, longitudinal, and experimental – that provide preliminary support for the importance of personal goal similarity for the experience of effortless, harmonious interactions within interpersonal interactions, and for reduced conflict. The first two studies look at perceptions of goal similarity and compatibility, while the remaining studies compare responses from both partners to get a more “objective” measure of goal similarity.

Study 1. Longitudinal Examination of Links Between Goal Similarity, Conflict, and Goal Progress

In an initial exploration of the role of similar personal goals in conflict, we conducted a longitudinal survey study among New York University undergraduate students. We sought to examine whether participants who perceived they cared about an important goal to the same degree as their partners reported lower frequency of conflicts over the next month. Because our participants were college students, we examined perceived similarity in the goal of academic achievement, which is the most commonly noted goal in this sample.

At Time 1, as part of a broader survey, 67 participants answered questions about the extent to which they and their best friend ($n = 41$) or romantic partner ($n = 26$) valued academic achievement to the same degree. Specifically, they rated their agreement with the following three statements: “My partner/friend and I care equally about academic achievement” and “My partner/friend and I are on the same page when it comes to the importance of academic achievement” and “I think my partner/friend and I have really different values when it comes to academic achievement” (reverse-scored). We used these three items ($\alpha = .87$) as an index of perceived goal similarity within the academic achievement domain. Participants also rated their agreement with the item “Academic achievement is very important to me right now”, which we used as a measure of their own goal commitment. As a measure

of conflict, participants reported how many fights, arguments, or conflicts they had had with their partner/friend over the past month. They also rated their relationship satisfaction using the item “I am fully satisfied with my relationship/friendship”, and their goal progress using the item “I feel I made good progress on my academic achievement goals this month.” At Time 2, one month later, participants once again indicated how many fights, arguments, or conflicts they and their partner or friend had had over the past month, rated their relationship satisfaction and goal progress using the same items, and provided the grades they had received on their midterm examinations.

As predicted, perceived goal similarity predicted lower reports of conflict over the following month, a relation that held when controlling for initial ratings of conflict and relationship satisfaction, and participants’ own ratings of goal importance. Ideally, we would also have assessed participants’ perceptions of the other’s goal commitment as an additional control: It is conceivable that conflict is not necessarily related to dyads’ similarity on this goal, but to something about the other’s own goal pursuit. Because of the way the goal similarity items were worded, it is unclear whether the rated similarity results from the partner/friend valuing the goal more or less than the participant. That is, the items may have unintentionally captured dissatisfaction with a particularly ambitious or unambitious partner. In subsequent studies, we were careful to include all such variables, which allows us to be more confident about the precise role that dissimilar goals may play in generating conflict within relationships.

Nonetheless, because of the longitudinal nature of the current study, in which perceived similarity predicted *change* in conflict from Time 1 to Time 2, we can tentatively report evidence that (the perception of) similarity reduces conflict. That is, although the available data can’t rule out third variable influences with this study, they do suggest the directionality of the link between similar goals and conflict.

Turning to examine goal progress, we found that perceived goal similarity positively predicted perceptions of progress one month later, as well as better performance on midterm examinations,

effects that held while controlling for initial goal progress. There are many reasons why goal similarity could lead to better goal progress. For example, if both partners share the same goals, this could promote the construction of a goal-encouraging environment. As another example, friends and partners who also value academic achievement may actually be more instrumental to goal pursuit, either through providing practical help or emotional support.

However, it is also possible that goal similarity could affect progress by decreasing conflict or increasing coordination. Indeed, Study 1's results also indicate that the relationship between goal similarity and goal progress is significantly (partially) mediated by conflict. We have suggested that when partners are pursuing similar personal goals, their everyday interactions should be smoother and more harmonious. For example, they should understand each other's perspectives better, have similar expectations about those interactions, and be more respectful of each other's goal pursuits. If their everyday interactions are indeed smoother, they are likely also more efficient or less depleting. In contrast, when partners are pursuing dissimilar personal goals, they may have misunderstandings, different expectations, and less respect for each other's goals, which may make their interactions less efficient and more resource-consuming (Finkel et al., 2006). If so, these subtle clashes could drain self-regulatory resources, leaving less energy and focus for goal pursuit, and thus negatively affecting goal progress. Study 2 includes additional measures that allow us to examine this link between high maintenance interactions (Finkel et al., 2006) and goal similarity.

Study 2: Potential Mechanisms of the Similarity-Conflict Link

In the second study, we sought to replicate the link between perceived goal similarity and conflict while including some additional measures to increase clarity about *how* goal similarity may affect the frequency and intensity of relational conflict. In particular, we examined the potential role of (a) high maintenance interactions and (b) partner instrumentality. First, as explained above, interactions

with partners that are rife with misunderstandings and inefficiencies may be one result of having dissimilar personal goals; if so, these draining interactions may produce more conflict. Second, past research has demonstrated that people feel closer to partners who are helpful or instrumental for ongoing goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), and we wondered whether instrumentality could play a mediating role in the effects of similarity on relationship satisfaction and conflict. That is, it may be the case that goal similarity produces positive outcomes because of a strong link between goal similarity and instrumentality. Partners with similar goals may be more likely to be helpful to each other than partners with dissimilar goals. However, it is also possible that instrumentality may reduce conflict – people may be more agreeable and accommodating to helpful others – but that it may not act as a mediating mechanism for the relation between goal similarity and conflict.

One hundred and fifty one married and dating couples at the University of Waterloo took part in a larger investigation consisting of multiple sessions and spanning a four-month period. In the session relevant to the current study, all participants completed an hour-long series of online questionnaires during which they answered questions about their personal goal pursuits, individual differences in motivational and self-regulatory variables, and features of their relationships, including quality and outcomes.

One of the measures was a new scale created to assess perceptions of personal goal similarity. This scale, modified from a 5-item goal congruence measure (Bohns et al., 2010), consisted of 14 items designed to be face-valid measures of goal similarity. Participants rated their agreement (on a 1 – 9 scale from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*) with items like “My partner and I have very similar personal goals”; “We have a lot in common when it comes to what personal goals we care about right now”; “ I feel like my partner and I are ‘on the same page’ in terms of the goals we pursue”; “Making decisions with my partner can be difficult because we have very different goals (reverse-scored).” Analyses of this sample indicated that this measure had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$).

Participants also rated the amount of conflict in their relationship, rating their agreement with a one-item measure that read “My partner and I disagree about a lot of things day to day” on a 1 – 7 scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Among the other measures, participants completed commitment and satisfaction subscales of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Satisfaction was assessed using the original 5-item measure from the IM scale (1998; $\alpha = .85$); commitment was assessed using a modified 7-item commitment scale (1998; $\alpha = .81$).

In addition, we wanted to examine the extent to which everyday interactions within the relationship were depleting or inefficient in nature, to determine if having high-maintenance interactions may be one route through which dissimilar goals are related to conflict. To do so, we included a four-item measure ($\alpha = .82$) taken from Finkel et al. (2006) that asks participants to rate their agreement with statements like “Maintaining efficient, well-coordinated interaction with my partner requires a lot of energy” and “Interactions with my partner generally go smoothly.”

Finally, we were interested in the role of perceived partner instrumentality, or the perception that one’s partner is helpful or useful for one’s goal progress (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; 2009). We measured instrumentality with a 13-item scale ($\alpha = .91$) asking participants to rate their agreement with statements like “In general, I find my partner to be very helpful with my goal pursuits” and “In general, my partner is a real source of strength for me in pursuing my goals.”

Replicating the pattern established in Study 1, the new measure of perceived goal similarity was negatively related to conflict ratings, a relation that held when we controlled for relationship satisfaction and commitment.

Next, we looked at the role of instrumentality. We found that perceptions of partner instrumentality did predict conflict, even controlling for satisfaction, such that individuals who saw their partners as more helpful for their personal goal pursuits reported fewer incidences of conflict. The directionality of this effect remains unclear: It is conceivable either that partners who have lower rates

of conflict may see their partners as more instrumental for their goals *or* that individuals fight less often with instrumental partners. Instrumentality was also related to goal similarity, as we predicted, such that similar partners were seen as more instrumental for goal progress. When both instrumentality and similarity were entered into a regression predicting conflict, however, we found no evidence of a mediating role for instrumentality. Instead, both variables significantly predicted conflict, even when controlling for relationship satisfaction. Thus, it seems that instrumentality, while related to both goal similarity and to conflict, does not account for the link between these two variables.

However, this study also found significant (albeit partial) mediation of the link between goal similarity and conflict by the high-maintenance interaction measure. This pattern supports the possibility that partners who pursue dissimilar personal goals may find their everyday interactions draining and difficult, which may cause conflict to arise. Because the reverse mediational pathway is also significant (i.e., similarity predicts depletion, with conflict as a significant partial mediator), it may also be the case that partners who pursue dissimilar personal goals may have more frequent conflicts, which may lead them to find their everyday interactions more draining and difficult.

Study 3. Replication With Objective Measure of Goal Similarity

Thus, the first two studies found evidence that partners who believe they share similar personal goals report less conflict. Of course, given the correlational nature of these studies, it would be premature to draw firm conclusions about the directionality of the relationship. Indeed, it seems quite plausible that participants who are engaged in frequent conflict with their partners may infer from that conflict that they must have different or incompatible goals than their partners. Although Studies 3 and 4 are also correlational studies, we believe we minimize the plausibility of this alternative account by measuring actual goal similarity rather than perceived goal similarity. That is, we look at both target and

partner ratings of their own goals, and use comparisons of those goals as predictors of target ratings of conflict. Because participants aren't privy to the responses of their partners to these goal questionnaires, the reverse causal direction – that conflict leads to goal dissimilarity – is less likely. It remains possible that frequent conflict could cause partners to begin to pursue different personal goals, but we believe that such an explanation is less parsimonious than our suggestion that pursuing different personal goals generates frequent conflict.

In Study 3, Dal Cin, Anderson, Holmes, and Young (2010) collected self-report data from both partners of dating couples at the University of Waterloo. Participants rated the importance of a series of goals, which ranged from specific and concrete to general and abstract, and were diverse in content, including personal goals (academic achievement, finances, health, leisure) and relational goals (communication, sex). Goal similarity was measured by computing an average of the absolute difference between partner goal importance ratings and self goal importance ratings. Participants also rated the degree of conflict in their relationships using nine items taken from Braiker and Kelley (1979; $\alpha = .90$ for female participants and $\alpha = .77$ for male participants). The scale measured participants' perceptions of the frequency and seriousness of conflicts in their relationship, as well as the frequency and intensity of negative affect (anger, frustration) in everyday interactions. Items included "My partner and I frequently argue with each other" and "When my partner and I argue, the arguments or problems we have are quite serious." Finally, participants rated their relationship satisfaction using four straightforward items (e.g., "I am extremely happy with my current romantic relationship"); the measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$ for female participants and $\alpha = .77$ for male participants).

As predicted, results showed that couples who reported similar goals reported less conflict in the relationship and more relationship satisfaction. Because we measured both partners' goals, instead of one partner's perceptions, we can rule out the role of perceptual illusions and biases in producing the link between goal similarity and conflict.

Study 4. Goal Similarity versus Other Types of Compatibility

To extend the findings of Study 3, we turned to examine another component from the larger longitudinal study of dating and married couples described in Study 2, which included measures of personality and attitudes, and allowed us to compare the effects of goal similarity with other kinds of similarity. Between one and two weeks after completing the online pre-measure, couples attended a 2.5 hour laboratory session in which they engaged in videotaped discussions, completed computer tasks, and completed additional self-report measures about their goal pursuits and relationships. Participants were instructed to refrain from discussing their responses with their partners, and couples were separated and seated in individual cubicles for the survey portion of the lab session.

Of relevance to the current research question, both members of the couple reported on the frequency of disagreements in their relationships. They also provided ratings of their commitment to and identification with academic achievement goals and health/fitness goals. We asked about these goal domains because they are commonly pursued by undergraduate students. The goal measure was an average ($\alpha = .90$) of four items assessing the commitment to and importance of the goal. For example, participants indicated their agreement (using 1 – 7 scales) with statements like “I identify strongly as someone who cares about this goal” and “This goal is very important to me.” To construct a measure of goal similarity, we calculated an absolute difference score to represent the magnitude of the difference between both partners’ ratings of their commitment to academic achievement and to fitness/health goals, and averaged those two measures. Participants also provided measures of other kinds of personal variables, such as in personality, religious beliefs, and attitudes. It is very likely that partners with different types of personalities would have greater conflict (imagine an extravert and an introvert making social plans), and that partners with different social attitudes would also have more disagreements (imagine a socialist and a conservative discussing current events over dinner). Indeed, as

briefly discussed in the introduction, there is evidence for the effects of similarity in personality and attitudes on relationship satisfaction (Gaunt, 2006). Including these measures in our analyses allowed us to determine whether similarities in personal goal pursuits have any remaining predictive power when accounting for these other important factors.

Overall, our results supported the importance of goal similarity in conflict. As predicted, and replicating the effect from Study 3, using this new (more objective) measure of goal similarity did not change the results. When partners reported similar levels of commitment to and identification with their important personal goals, they also reported lower incidence of conflict with their partner. This relation held when we controlled for relationship satisfaction, and most importantly, when we controlled for the absolute levels of goal commitment of both partners. Because the effect holds even when controlling for individual reports of goal commitment, we can be more confident that it is indeed the discrepancy between the partners' goals, rather than something about one of the partners' goal pursuits itself, that predicts conflict (see Kenny & Acitelli, 1994).

Next, we were interested in examining whether there is a unique role for goal similarity or compatibility in particular, or whether what we are capturing with our goal similarity measures is another type of similarity, such as similar attitudes, values, or personality types. To examine this idea, we analyzed the link between our difference score measure of goal similarity and conflict while controlling for a number of other potentially useful predictors. Goal similarity turned out to be a strong and robust predictor of conflict, even when compared with consequential variables such as similarity in political and social attitudes, religious beliefs, values, and Big Five personality traits. That is, it continued to be a significant negative predictor of conflict.

Study 5. Experimental Evidence for the Effects of Incompatible Goals on Conflict Behaviors

In the fifth study, we aimed to find experimental evidence to support the idea that dissimilar personal goals could affect interpersonal conflicts. Via a subtle priming technique, we activated the mental representation of a health/fitness goal, and examined its influence on participants' responses to hypothetical relationship scenarios in which there was potential for conflict. We were interested in whether participants would indicate that they would be more or less accommodating and cooperative in these hypothetical scenarios depending on (a) whether they were primed with the health/fitness goal, and (b) whether they had indicated (earlier in the session) that they and their partner were similar or dissimilar in this goal domain. We predicted that participants who reported dissimilarities with their partner in the importance of health/fitness goals would respond to the primed goal by being less cooperative and accommodating in the hypothetical scenarios.

Participants were American women who were currently in romantic relationships; the sample was recruited from an online data collection service and completed this study for payment. They began by answering questions about their personal goal pursuits. One such question asked participants to indicate whether they and their partner valued several goals equally, including career goals, family goals, and health/fitness goals. This item read, "When it comes to health and fitness goals..." and participants could choose one of three items, "My partner cares much less than I do"; "My partner and I care equally"; "My partner cares much more than I do." Of the 87 participants, 33 indicated that they cared more about the goal than their partner, 37 indicated they and their partner valued the goal equally, and 17 indicated that their partner cared more about the goal. This breakdown, in which more participants indicated they cared more about the goal than their partner, may reflect our use of an all-female sample, given the often reported sex difference in the pursuit of health and fitness goals (e.g., Fishbach, Friedman & Kruglanski, 2003). We combined participants who said their partner cared either more or less about the goal into one group we term the "dissimilar" group. Participants who reported

equal goal importance were termed the “similar” group. (Results for the two different “dissimilar” groups did not differ.)

After completing some measures irrelevant to the current research question, participants completed a shortened version of a scrambled sentence task (Srull & Wyer, 1979), in which they were randomly assigned to be exposed to words related to either health/fitness goal-relevant words (e.g., fit, healthy, strong, exercise) or control words matched for valence (e.g., book, artistic, desk, wish) embedded in larger strings of neutral words. This task served to activate a health/fitness goal for half of the participants.

Finally, among other items related to their desire to work toward health and career goals, participants completed our dependent measure of interest: five questions designed to assess their desire to be cooperative and accommodating to their partners’ needs and preferences. The items were modeled after extensive prior research on accommodative behaviors in relationships (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991), but were drastically shortened to meet the requirements for this online data collection procedure. Participants read a one-line scenario that presented them with a decision to either cooperate with their partners’ interests or to refuse to do so (i.e., to be other- versus self-interested) and then chose one of four response options that varied in the extent to which they were positive and constructive. For example, one scenario read, “Imagine that your partner insisted on inviting a friend over to dinner, even though you don’t like this friend. How likely would you be to engage in each of the following actions?” Participants chose from the following options: “I would refuse”; “I would protest but give in”; “I would grudgingly agree”; “I would cheerfully agree.” The other scenarios asked about participants’ responses when their partners rented a movie they didn’t want to see, forgot to run an important errand, and made a big mess at home. The scenarios were designed to be mundane examples of decisions members of couples make each day about how to respond when their interests do not coincide with their partners’ interests.

We conducted a two (prime: health/fitness goal versus control) by two (relationship type: similar vs. dissimilar on health goal) ANOVA on the scenario responses. As predicted, we found a significant two-way interaction. For participants who reported that they and their partner held dissimilar values toward health and fitness goals, the goal prime led to less accommodating responses to the hypothetical scenarios. For participants who reported similar levels of caring about health and fitness goals, the goal prime did not affect their responses. Stated another way, within the control condition, there was no effect of similarity on accommodating responses; within the health goal prime condition, there was a significant effect of similarity, such that participants who perceived goal similarity with their partners reported more accommodating responses than did partners who perceived goal dissimilarity.

This study provides experimental support for the role of personal goal similarity in everyday relationship interactions, and suggests one possible explanation of the link between similarity and conflict in the first four studies. When participants were reminded of a personal goal – in this case, health and fitness – they were less accommodating to the preferences of dissimilar (vs. similar) partners, in decisions completely unrelated to the health and fitness domain. They were less likely to agree to decisions which were in their partners', but not their own, interests, and they were more likely to say they would feel angry and get in a fight with their partners when those partners engaged in mundane negative acts. By demonstrating that the effect of similar goals is stronger when the personal goal itself is activated, and relying on prior reports of the goal similarity, this study provides evidence for the causal role of personal goals in these effects – when the goal was not currently active, participants were equally accommodating to partners who shared and didn't share the goal.

Future Directions and Conclusions

Thus, the current research provides support for the interdependence theory notion that dissimilar goal pursuits can predict daily conflict within interpersonal relationships. Five studies using

varied measures and methodologies demonstrated that when partners do not value personal goals to the same degree, they tend to report more occurrences of conflict within the relationship, and more negative responses to potential conflicts and disagreements. Although these findings demonstrate that goal similarity, a previously neglected topic within research on relationship conflicts, is related to the occurrence of conflict, they leave many questions unanswered. Most importantly, the findings presented here offer intriguing evidence of some of the potential mechanisms underlying this link, like the depleting nature of interacting with someone who pursues different goals, but it is clear that there may be many other processes at work. Future research that experimentally manipulates some of the posited mechanisms would be particularly valuable.

One interesting extension of the current findings would be to examine how goal similarity and conflict relate across the duration of close relationships. Because personal goals are likely to change over the lifespan of an average relationship, it may be particularly enlightening to examine the links between goals and relationships as goals change (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, in press). For example, it is likely that some couples who once shared similar goals will encounter conflicts that have arisen due to changes in one or both partners' goals across time. As Holmes and Murray (1996) note, "the compatibility of important goals is best thought of as a moving window rather than a fixed quality of a relationship." As another example, couples who start out their relationship with dissimilar goals may well grow to possess more similar goals over time, either because both partners' goals grow together or because one partner adopts the other's goals.

Another important direction for future research is to examine the role of dissimilar relationship goals, like goals for increased intimacy versus independence, and dissimilar joint goals, like goals to buy a bigger house versus save money. Because outcomes are likely to be even more interdependent for such goals, and because relationship-level factors have been shown to have an important effect on

conflict behaviors (Simpson, Rholes, & Philips, 1996) the effects of dissimilar relationship goals may be both pervasive and powerful.

These are only a few of the many avenues available for future research in this area. The effects of personal goal pursuits on interpersonal relationships, and in turn, the effects of relationships on personal goal pursuits, are only beginning to be understood (Finkel & Fitzsimons, in press; Fitzsimons & Finkel, in press a; Fitzsimons & Finkel, in press b). However, the current research presents an important stride forward in our research on this interplay of self-regulatory and relational processes. In all of our prior work (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), we have focused on only one partner's goal pursuits and feelings about the relationship, while acknowledging that such an approach is seriously limited, as real interactions involve two individuals' goal pursuits (see Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). In the current research, we try for the first time in our lab to examine the dyadic links between both partners' goals, a first step towards building a rich understanding of how these effects play out in real relationships.

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