



## The effects of romantic partners' goal congruence on affective well-being

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### ABSTRACT

Affective well-being in romantic couples was examined from the perspective of interdependence theory. The independent variables were (a) presence of partner, (b) whether an activity met the actor's goals, and (c) goals of the actor's partner. Dependent variables were feelings of closeness and affective well-being (happiness, sadness, anger, anxiety). We predicted a three-way interaction with the highest affective well-being when partners are together and activities meet both partners' goals. In Study 1, data from 194 married individuals who participated in an experience sampling study supported our predictions. Feelings of closeness partially mediated the effect on affective well-being. Study 2 replicated the findings with 112 participants in dating relationships who recalled specific events and made ratings about goals and affective well-being.

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### 1. Introduction

Goal theories of well-being propose that the pursuit of personal goals is important for an individual's well-being (Diener, 1984). These theories argue that well-being increases when goals are reached or goal progress is made (Diener, 1984). Many studies support these fundamental tenets of goal theories of well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grassmann, 1998; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Emmons, 1986, 1999; Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998; Emmons & King, 1988; King, 2008; King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998; Riediger & Freund, 2004). Indeed, the effects of goal progress on well-being are so robust that some researchers have suggested that the best way to increase well-being in the long term is to adopt and pursue important and attainable personal goals (King, 2008).

Although past research has provided important insights into the relation between goals and well-being, goal theories of well-being tend to ignore that people often pursue their goals in the company of others. The present article examines goal pursuit in the context of romantic relationships. Individuals in close relationships cannot simply pursue their individualistic goals, but have to take the goals of their relationship partner into account. The coordination with a romantic partner can occur at various levels from major life goals to more mundane decisions such as “what TV show to watch,

whose friends to go out with, or whether to engage in sexual activity” (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005, p. 327). Interdependence theory provides a theoretical framework to investigate goals and well-being from an interpersonal perspective (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Interdependence theory distinguishes three types of situations according to different degrees of *covariation of interests* (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In competitive, zero-sum situations interests are negatively related. Such situations are likely to be rare in intimate relationships because individuals in relationships tend to be concerned about their partner's well-being (Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008; Schimmack & Lucas, 2010). A second type of situation consists of situations in which partners' interests are perfectly aligned. Finally, a third type of situation consists of situations in which partners' interests are neither perfectly aligned, nor exact opposites. At times, it can be difficult to make choices that are equally fulfilling for both partners' individual goals. We use the terms *goal-congruent* and *goal-incongruent* situations to refer to these two latter types of situations respectively. Our main goal was to examine how these situations influence both partners' emotional experiences, which are one important component of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984).

One simple solution to goal-incongruent situations would be for each partner to pursue his or her goals individually. However, relationship partners are reluctant to choose this option because it could undermine the relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Another solution is to *sacrifice*, where sacrifice is defined as departing “from one's immediate interests to promote the partner's interests” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, p. 362). This distinguishes

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goal-incongruent situations from goal-congruent situations in which both partners can engage in a shared activity that is consistent with both partners' immediate interests.

Several studies have examined sacrifice in intimate relationships (Van Lange et al., 1997). However, relatively few studies have examined mundane sacrifices and their immediate consequences for affective well-being. Impett et al. (2005) demonstrated that participants experienced more positive affect on days when sacrifice was approach motivated (e.g., make the partner happy) and more negative affect when it was avoidance motivated (e.g., avoid conflict). There are two possible, and not mutually exclusive, explanations for this result. One possibility is that partners recognize that approach motivated sacrifice is motivated by a concern for their well-being. This elicits feelings of affection or gratitude and motivates partners to sacrifice for their partner later in the day, which then elicits positive feelings in the partner who initially sacrificed. In this model, sacrificing may have no immediate positive effects or even negative effects on well-being. The well-being gain is a result of a system of mutual exchanges of sacrifices. An alternative explanation would be that sacrifice for the benefit of a partner immediately increases well-being because individuals benefit from the happiness that their sacrifice produces in their partner. To test these models, it is necessary to measure affective well-being in goal-congruent and goal-incongruent situations.

Impett et al. (2005) focused on the consequences of sacrificing on the affective well-being of the individual who sacrificed pursuing own goals, but it is also important to study the consequences of being the beneficiary of a sacrifice for affective well-being. Although it may seem obvious that being a beneficiary of a sacrifice increases affective well-being this is not necessarily the case (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For example, attributions about the motives behind the favor may lead to positive emotions of gratitude or negative feelings of indebtedness.

Interdependence theory typically focuses on situations when partners are together and have to coordinate joint actions. We also studied affective well-being when partners are not together for two reasons. First, these situations can be used as a comparison standard for goal congruent and goal-incongruent situations when partners are together. In this way, we can examine whether goal-congruence enhances affective well-being or whether goal-incongruence undermines well-being in comparison to typical levels of affective well-being. Second, individuals' actions can be congruent or incongruent with their partner's goals even when their partner is not present.

In sum, we examined the influence of three factors on affective well-being, namely (a) whether partners are spending time together or not, (b) whether an activity meets the actor's goals (the actor is the partner whose well-being is assessed) and (c) whether an activity meets the goals of the actor's partner. These three factors create eight situations. These situations are described in Table 1 with a prototypical example for each situation.

In situations when individuals are not together with their partner (scenarios 5–8 in Table 1), intrapersonal goal theories predict higher well-being when individuals pursue their own goals (scenarios 5 and 6) than when they are not pursuing their own goals (scenarios 7 and 8) (Brunstein, 1993; Diener, 1984; King, 2008; Lazarus, 1991). These theories do not consider the influence of partners' goals. Also, they do not predict how pursuing only a partner's goal will influence well-being (scenario 7 in Table 1).

In situations when individuals are together with their partner (scenarios 1–4), they should experience higher affective well-being than when they are not with their partner. This prediction is consistent with previous findings (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004; Oishi, Diener, Scollon, & Biswas-Diener, 2004) and theories of human values and motives that postulate a need for affiliation (McClelland, 1985; Murray, 1938). Although

need fulfillment increases general feelings of pleasure and happiness, fulfillment of distinct needs also produces distinct emotions. Emotions like affection, warmth, intimacy, and closeness signal that intimacy needs are being met (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). Thus, we propose that the presence of the partner predicts more intense feelings of closeness and that these feelings of closeness contribute to affective well-being because the fulfillment of intimacy needs is pleasurable (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989).

However, interdependence theory suggests that the presence of the partner is not sufficient to fulfill intimacy needs. Rather, feelings of closeness in the presence of a partner are influenced by more complex appraisal processes (Lazarus, 1991), and depending on these appraisal processes, people may feel hurt and distant from a partner when intimacy needs are not fulfilled (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gere & MacDonald, 2010). Interdependence theory suggests that goal-incongruence is one factor that moderates the influence of being with a partner on feelings of closeness and affective well-being. For example, strong insistence on one's own goals by one partner ("I want my way!") may make the other partner feel neglected and hurt ("Don't you care about me?") (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In contrast, engaging in activities that further both partners' goals can elicit strong feelings of closeness because these situations highlight the congruent aspects of the two partners (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Thus, we predicted that partners experience the highest feelings of closeness and affective well-being when they are together and engaged in a goal-congruent activity (scenario 1 in Table 1).

In contrast to goal-congruent situations, it is possible to distinguish two types of goal-incongruent situations. In one situation, the activity meets the actor's goal, and does not meet the partner's goal (i.e., the partner sacrifices) (scenario 2 in Table 1). In the other situation, the activity does not meet the actor's goals and meets the partner's goals (i.e., the actor sacrifices) (scenario 3 in Table 1). One interesting question that we wanted to examine is whether these two incongruent situations have different effects on affective well-being and closeness. Intrapersonal goal theories might suggest that actors have higher affective well-being when the partner sacrifices because they get to pursue their own goals. However, interdependence theory suggests that awareness of not meeting a partner's goals can undermine the actor's own affective well-being, although situations with incongruent goals elicit complex cognitive and emotional processes that can moderate these effects (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

It is noteworthy that our conceptualization of the relationship between intimacy feelings and affective well-being differs from Kahneman et al.'s (2004) approach. Kahneman et al. (2004) included ratings of feeling warm/friendly in the positive affect component of well-being. We think that it is problematic to do so because feeling warm/friendly is only one of many specific emotions that can contribute to one's overall level of positive affect. By including warmth in the measure of affective well-being and excluding other positive emotions (e.g., pride), the affective well-being indicator is biased towards situations that elicit affection. For this reason, we prefer to measure affective well-being with more basic emotions, such as happiness or cheerfulness that reflect whether a situation is appraised as positive or negative for one's own well-being (Lazarus, 1991; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). In support of our approach, Schimmack (2003) found that affection was correlated with life satisfaction, but made no unique contribution to life satisfaction after controlling for feelings of happiness.

In sum, our study brings together several lines of research that have examined affective well-being from different perspectives within a single integrative framework. The key feature of this framework is to distinguish three factors that create eight different types of situations that can influence the affective well-being of

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