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Outsourcing Self-Regulation

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Abstract

Three studies demonstrate a novel phenomenon—*self-regulatory outsourcing*—in which thinking about how other people can be instrumental (i.e., helpful) for a given goal undermines motivation to expend effort on that goal. In Experiment 1, participants who thought about how their partner helped them with health goals (as opposed to career goals) planned to spend less time and effort on health goals in the upcoming week. This pattern was stronger for depleted participants than for nondepleted participants. In Experiment 2, participants who thought about how their partner helped them with academic-achievement goals procrastinated more, leaving themselves less time for an academic task, than did participants in two control conditions. This pattern was stronger for participants who were told that procrastinating would drain their resources for the academic task than for participants who were told that procrastinating would not drain their resources for that task. In Experiment 3, participants who decreased their effort after thinking of an instrumental significant other reported higher relationship commitment to that individual than did participants who did not decrease their effort. The possibility for shared (or *transactive*) self-regulation is discussed.

Keywords

motivation, interpersonal relationships, self-regulation, effort

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Imagine for a moment that no effort were required to achieve your goals. You could effortlessly run a marathon, fit into your jeans from high school, amass an impressive publication record, play guitar like Jimi Hendrix, and raise well-adjusted, happy, grateful children. Of course, that is but a fantasy. To achieve important goals, people must exert considerable effort.

This article examines one novel influence on individuals' motivation to exert themselves toward goals. We tested the effects of instrumental (i.e., supportive or helpful) relationship partners on goal-directed effort.[1] Given the evidence that social support benefits individuals in their goal pursuits (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Feeney, 2004; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009), it may seem that thinking about supportive partners should be motivationally bolstering, leading individuals to work harder. However, drawing upon basic principles in social cognition and motivation science, we advance the opposite hypothesis—that such thoughts are motivationally undermining, causing individuals to make less ambitious goal-pursuit plans and to spend less time pursuing their goals.

Historically, scholars primarily studied self-regulation as an intrapersonal process (for a review, see Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007). Over the past decade, however, scholars have demonstrated diverse ways in which interpersonal processes influence self-regulatory success (see Finkel & Fitzsimons, 2011; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). This article extends that work by examining a novel phenomenon we term *self-regulatory outsourcing*, an effect in which individuals exert less effort to achieve a goal after considering ways in which a significant other is instrumental for helping them achieve that goal. We suggest that when individuals think about how a partner can help with an ongoing goal, they unconsciously "outsource" self-regulatory effort to their partner, relying on him or her for future goal progress, and, consequently, exert less effort themselves.

This hypothesis may initially seem counterintuitive given that supportive significant others typically bolster self-regulation (Brunstein et al., 1996; Rusbult et al., 2009; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). In addition, thinking of helpful significant others could heighten social pressure (e.g., a sense of public commitment) and self-efficacy, which typically enhance

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motivation. However, individuals tend not to exert as much effort when they can make goal progress through more than one route (Kruglanski et al., 2002) or when other people are also striving to achieve the same goal (i.e., *social loafing*; Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979); they also seek to conserve their self-regulatory resources when possible (Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Given these findings, we suggest that when individuals think about how a significant other is instrumental for a given goal, they will feel less motivated to work hard on that goal.

This diminished motivation should be particularly evident in individuals whose self-regulatory resources are low. According to depletion theory, acts of self-regulation draw on a limited resource; tapping into that resource to perform one task diminishes the amount available for subsequent tasks, leading to laziness and a preference for easier tasks (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Thus, individuals must deploy self-regulatory resources strategically. We suggest that depleted individuals should be especially susceptible to the motivationally undermining effects of thinking about an instrumental significant other.

If self-regulation resources are limited, then individuals' behavior may also be affected by anticipated effort. According to resource-conservation theory, individuals are frequently motivated to conserve resources for upcoming self-regulation needs (Muraven et al., 2006). This motivation is particularly strong when individuals want to perform well on the upcoming task and when they believe an initial task is resource consuming. Therefore, we suggest that individuals will conserve relatively few resources for an upcoming goal-relevant task when reminded that a significant other helps them achieve that goal.

We have suggested that thinking about how a significant other can help one achieve a given goal can undermine motivation to expend effort, especially under certain predictable conditions. What might be the consequences of self-regulatory outsourcing for relationships? Extrapolating from interdependence theory (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), we suggest that relying on one's partner for goal progress will increase feelings of dependence on the partner, which will in turn increase subjective commitment to the partner. In addition, relying on one's partner should enhance relationship commitment to ensure continued help (Murray & Holmes, 2008). Thus, we predicted that individuals who outsourced motivation would experience stronger commitment to their partner than would individuals who did not outsource motivation.

Hypotheses and Research Overview

Our primary hypothesis, the outsourcing hypothesis, is that individuals will expend less effort when they think about ways in which a significant other is instrumental for a given goal than when they do not. Our depletion hypothesis is that the outsourcing effect should be especially pronounced among depleted individuals, and our conservation hypothesis is that it should be especially pronounced among individuals who believe that engaging in an initial task will deplete resources required for a subsequent, goal-relevant task. Finally, our relationship-commitment hypothesis is that among individuals reminded that a significant other helps them achieve a certain goal, individuals who outsource (i.e., who reduce their own effort expenditure) more will report stronger relationship commitment than those who outsource less.

In Experiment 1, in which we tested the outsourcing and depletion hypotheses, participants thought about how a significant other was instrumental for a focal goal (health and fitness) or a control goal (career) and were either depleted or not. We assessed how much time and effort they planned to spend working on their health and fitness goal during the ensuing week. In Experiment 2, in which we tested the outsourcing and conservation hypotheses, participants thought about how a significant other was instrumental for a focal goal (academics) or a control goal (recreation) and were told that performance on an initial enjoyable task either would or would not impair their performance on a subsequent academic task. We assessed procrastination (time spent on the initial task) as the dependent measure. Experiment 3, in which we tested the outsourcing and relationship-commitment hypotheses, employed procedures similar to those in Experiment 1 and included a relationship-commitment measure after the outsourcing task. Experiments 2 and 3 also included a second control condition, in which participants simply engaged in positive thinking about their partner.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we tested both the outsourcing and the depletion hypotheses. We employed a 2 × 2 design with partner instrumentality (for a health and fitness goal or a career goal) and depletion (low or high) as between-subjects variables; participants' motivation to achieve their health and fitness goal (the focal goal) was the dependent measure. Motivation was operationalized as participants' plans to spend time and effort on health and fitness in the upcoming week. Participants also reported commitment to and perceived progress toward their health and fitness goal; we sought to establish whether the outsourcing effect would emerge independently of these variables.

Method

Fifty-six women (mean age = 33.10 years, *SD* = 8.52), sampled from members of an online data-collection service, completed the study online. Only women were invited to participate because women tend to prioritize health and fitness goals more than men do (e.g., Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003). Two participants were not in a romantic relationship, and 2 others did not complete the manipulations; these 4 participants were excluded from the analyses.

Participants first completed a depletion manipulation (modified from the one used by Muraven, Gagné, & Rosman, 2008), in which they retyped a paragraph that appeared on a

computer screen while either skipping all vowels (low-depletion condition) or skipping all vowels that appeared two letters after another vowel (high-depletion condition). Next, participants provided one example of how their partner helped with an everyday goal. In the focal-goal condition, participants provided one example of how their partner helped with their current health and fitness goals. In the control-goal condition, participants provided one example of how their partner helped with their current career goals. Next, participants rated how much time and how much effort they planned to spend on their health and fitness goals in the upcoming week; the rating scale ranged from 1, *much less than usual*, to 5, *much more than usual* ($\alpha = .95$). Participants also completed a two-item goal-commitment measure ($\alpha = .96$), rating their agreement (from 1, *I completely disagree*, to 7, *I completely agree*) with the following statements: "My health and fitness goals are important to me" and "I care about my progress on my health and fitness goals." Finally, they responded to a measure of perceived goal progress, using the same 7-point scale to rate their agreement with the item "I feel satisfied with my recent progress on my health and fitness goals."

Results and discussion

We performed a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the planned-goal-pursuit measure, with both depletion (low or high) and partner instrumentality (focal goal or control goal) as between-subjects factors. No main effect of depletion emerged, $F(1, 48) = 1.44$, $p = .24$, but as predicted, a main effect of partner instrumentality emerged, $F(1, 48) = 22.47$, $p < .001$; participants planned to spend less time and effort on their health and fitness goals in the focal-goal condition ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.19$) than in the control-goal condition ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.80$).

As predicted, the Partner Instrumentality × Depletion interaction was also significant, $F(1, 48) = 4.46$, $p = .04$. As shown in Figure 1, the effect of instrumentality condition on planned goal pursuit was stronger in the high-depletion condition, $F(1, 21) = 21.50$, $p < .001$, than in the low-depletion condition, $F(1, 27) = 3.86$, $p = .06$.

Similar two-way ANOVAs conducted on goal commitment and on perceived goal progress produced no significant main effects or interactions, all Fs < 1. These null effects suggest that the difference in planned effort caused by the instrumentality manipulation was not driven by a reduction in participants' evaluation of the importance of health and fitness or by an increase in perceived goal progress.[2]

Thus, participants who thought about their partner's instrumentality for their health and fitness goal (as opposed to another important goal) planned to spend less time and effort pursuing health and fitness. As predicted, this pattern was stronger for participants with fewer available self-regulatory resources (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007).

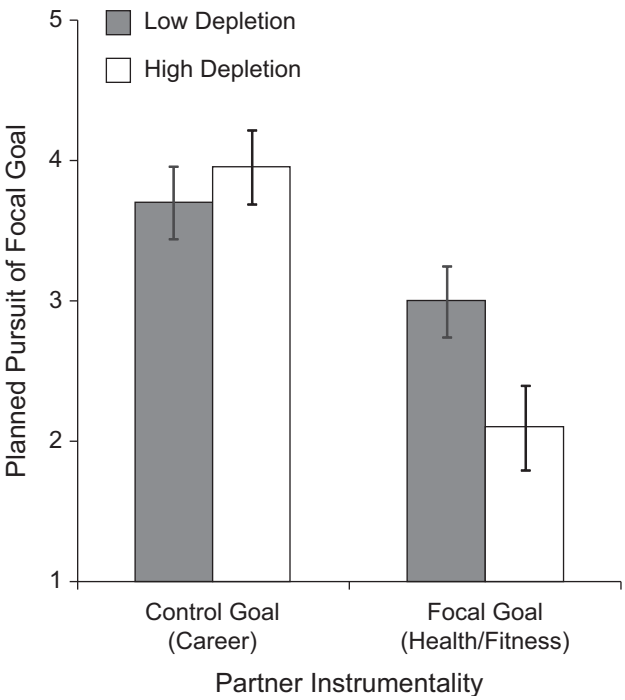

Fig. 1. Results from Experiment 1: planned pursuit of the focal goal as a function of depletion (low or high) and partner-instrumentality condition (control goal or focal goal). Planned goal pursuit was rated on a scale from 1, *much less time* (*effort*) *than usual*, to 5, *much more time* (*effort*) *than usual*. Error bars denote standard errors of the mean.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 provided a second test of the outsourcing hypothesis and a first test of the conservation hypothesis. We measured the extent to which participants saved resources for an academic-achievement task by examining how much time they spent procrastinating by working on a relatively appealing initial task that was unrelated to achievement. The initial task was described as either consuming resources needed for the subsequent achievement task or not consuming those resources. On the basis of research on the conservation model of self-control (Muraven et al., 2006), we viewed time spent procrastinating by working on the first, distractor task as an index of how much participants sought to conserve resources for the second, target task. We predicted that participants would procrastinate longer (thus conserving fewer resources for the second task) when they had been reminded of how their partner helps with their academic-achievement goal than when they had not been reminded. We also predicted that this pattern would be stronger when participants believed that the first task would drain resources needed to complete the second task.

Experiment 2 extended Experiment 1 in several ways. In addition to employing a behavioral measure of effort expenditure, it

examined a different focal goal (academic achievement instead of health and fitness) and included an additional control condition, in which participants thought about something they liked about their partner. This control allowed us to test our assumption that the outsourcing effect is driven by undermining of motivation in the focal-goal condition rather than by bolstering of motivation in the control condition and to ensure that this effect is not simply due to positive mood (given that positive mood can be demotivating; Carver & Scheier, 1990). Experiment 2 employed a 3 × 2 design with instrumentality condition (the focal goal of academic achievement, the control goal of recreation, or the control nongoal) and task frame (nondepleting or depleting) as between-subjects factors and time spent on the distractor task as the dependent measure.

Method

A total of 77 students (42 women and 35 men; mean age = 19.68 years, *SD* = 2.85) completed the study online. Three participants were excluded from the analyses because they were not in a romantic relationship. Participants first completed the instrumentality manipulation. In the focal-goal condition, they provided one example of how their romantic partner helped with their ongoing academic-achievement goals. In the control-goal condition, they provided one example of how their romantic partner helped with any ongoing recreational goal. In the control-nongoal condition, they reported something they liked about their partner.

Next, participants read instructions indicating that they would use the remainder of the experimental session to complete two tasks. The first would be an entertaining puzzle task; the second would be a challenging academic task that would improve their future test-taking performance. Participants learned that they could decide how much time to spend on the first task before moving on to the second task. In the depleting-frame condition, participants read that spending time on the first task would drain their cognitive resources, making it harder for them to learn lessons from the second task. In the nondepleting-frame condition, participants read that spending time on the first task would not drain their cognitive resources and would not make it any harder for them to learn lessons from the second task.

Participants then spent as much time as they wished on the first task, a series of easy word puzzles; the program ended automatically after 7 min. In reality, there was no second task. The dependent measure was how much time participants spent on the first task.

Results and discussion

We performed a two-way ANOVA on the amount of time participants procrastinated by working on the first task, with instrumentality condition (focal goal, control goal, or control nongoal) and task frame (nondepleting or depleting) as between-subjects factors.

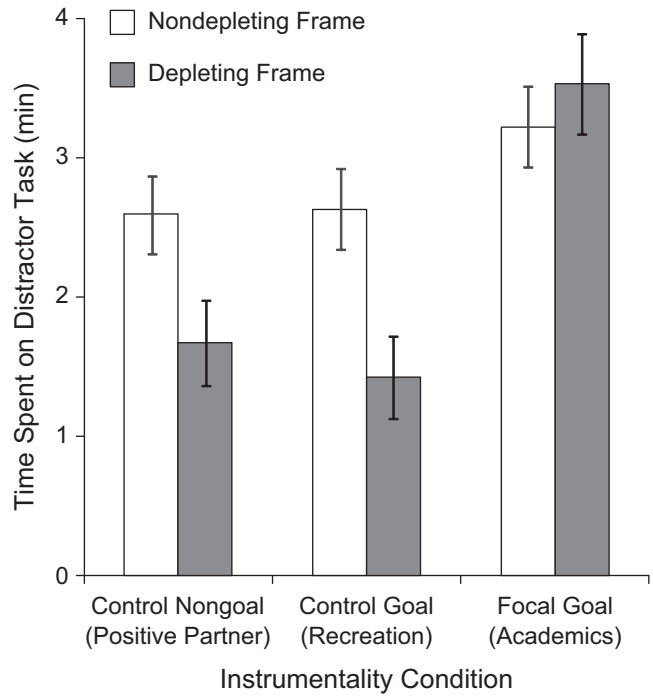

Fig. 2. Results from Experiment 2: time spent on the distractor task as a function of task frame (depleting or nondepleting) and instrumentality condition (control nongoal, control goal, or focal goal). Error bars denote standard errors of the mean.

As predicted, a main effect of instrumentality condition emerged, $F(2, 68) = 10.58$, $p < .001$. Participants spent more time on the distractor task in the focal-goal condition (M = 3.34 min, SD = 1.25) than in the control-goal condition (M = 2.05 min, SD = 1.18), $F(1, 46) = 13.65$, $p = .001$, and in the control-nongoal condition (M = 2.17 min, SD = 1.11), $F(1, 47) = 12.16$, $p = .001$. The means of the two control conditions did not differ significantly from each other, $F < 1$.

A main effect of task frame also emerged, $F(1, 68) = 5.39$, $p = .02$; participants spent less time on the distractor task when it was framed as depleting resources for the target task (M = 2.09 min, SD = 1.40) than when it was framed as nondepleting (M = 2.82 min, SD = 1.12).

Finally, as predicted, the Instrumentality Condition × Task Frame interaction was significant, $F(2, 68) = 3.08$, $p = .052$. As shown in Figure 2, when the distractor task was framed as depleting resources for the goal-relevant task, instrumentality condition significantly affected time spent on the distractor task, $F(2, 30) = 10.83$, $p < .001$; participants in the focal-goal condition spent more time on the distractor task (M = 3.53 min, SD = 1.44) than did participants in the control-goal condition (M = 1.42 min, SD = 1. 00), $F(1, 19) = 15.94$, $p = .001$, or participants in the control-nongoal condition (M = 1.68 min, SD = 0.90), $F(1, 19) = 13.30$, $p = .002$. The same pattern was evident when the task was framed as nondepleting (focal-goal condition: M = 3.22 min, SD = 1.15; control-goal condition: M = 2.63 min, SD = 1.05; control-nongoal condition: M = 2.59 min,

SD = 1.12), although the effect was not significant, $F(2, 32) = 1.41$, $p = .26$, and none of the conditions differed significantly from each other, *p*s > .16.

Participants in both the control-goal and the control-nongoal conditions responded to the task frame by spending less time on the distractor task when it was described as depleting than when it was described as nondepleting—control-goal condition: $F(1, 23) = 8.69$, $p < .001$; control-nongoal condition: $F(1, 24) = 5.13$, $p = .03$. In contrast, participants in the focal-goal condition spent approximately equal amounts of time on the distractor task in the two frame conditions, $F < 1$, a finding that further reinforces our conclusion that these participants decreased their goal-directed effort.

Thus, participants procrastinated longer, conserving fewer resources for a goal-relevant task, when they had just thought about how their romantic partner was instrumental for that goal than in either of the two control conditions. This pattern was stronger when participants thought the distractor task would interfere with performance on the goal-relevant task than when they did not think it would interfere.

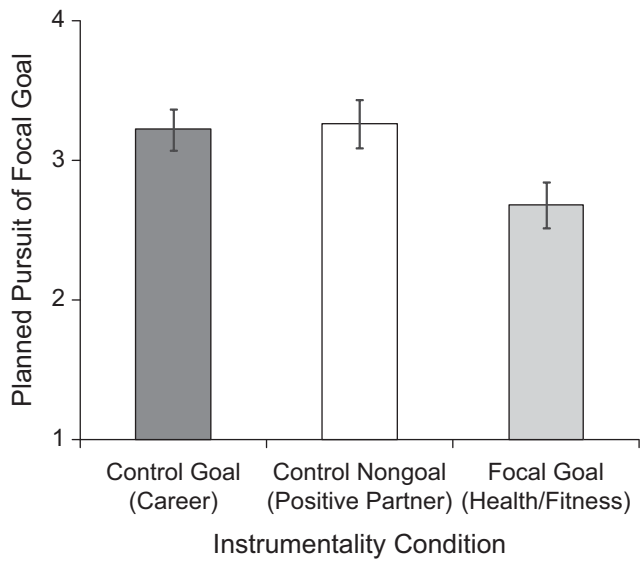

Fig. 3. Results from Experiment 3: planned pursuit of the focal goal as a function of instrumentality condition (control goal, control nongoal, or focal goal). Planned goal pursuit was rated on a scale from 1, *much less time than usual*, to 5, *much more time than usual*. Error bars denote standard errors of the mean.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 provided a third test of the outsourcing hypothesis and a first test of the relationship-commitment hypothesis. Experiment 3 extended beyond Experiment 1 by including a partner-positivity control condition (as in Experiment 2) and by assessing relationship commitment. We predicted that outsourcing effort to a partner (by reducing one's own plans to expend effort) would promote commitment to that partner. That is, individuals who respond to a reminder of their partner's helpfulness by reducing their own plans to work on a goal—those who outsource effort—should report stronger commitment to their partner, because of their increased dependence, whereas individuals who are reminded of their partner's helpfulness but who do not reduce their own effort—those who do not outsource to the partner—should not feel as motivated to maintain the relationship and should therefore report no increase in commitment. (Although we are suggesting a causal mechanism, the correlational nature of the analysis does not allow for certainty about the direction of this relationship.)

Method

A total of 99 American women (mean age = 32.49 years, *SD* = 8.75), sampled from members of a data-collection service, participated in this study online. The data from 6 participants were recorded incorrectly because of computer error; 3 additional participants did not complete the instrumentality manipulation. Data from these participants were excluded from the analyses.

First, in the focal-goal condition, participants provided one example of how their partner helped with their health and fitness goals. In the control-goal condition, participants provided one example of how their partner helped with their career goals. In the control-nongoal condition, participants reported one thing they liked about their partner. Next, all participants rated how much time they planned to spend pursuing their health and fitness goals in the upcoming week (from 1, *much less time than usual*, to 5, *much more time than usual*). Finally, they completed a relationship-commitment measure, rating their agreement with two statements ("I am highly committed to my current partner" and "I believe I will stay with this partner for the rest of my life") on a scale from 1, *I completely disagree*, to 7, *I completely agree*. Responses to these two items were highly correlated ($r = .84$) and were averaged to create one index of relationship commitment.

Results and discussion

First, we performed a one-way ANOVA on plans to spend time pursuing the focal goal, with instrumentality condition (focal goal, control goal, or control nongoal) as a between-subjects factor. As depicted in Figure 3, a main effect of condition emerged, $F(2, 87) = 3.96$, $p = .02$; participants in the focal-goal condition planned to spend less time pursuing the focal goal ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.91$) than did participants in the control-goal condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.85$) and participants in the control-nongoal condition ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.89$). Thus, we again found that participants planned to work less hard to achieve their focal goal if they thought about how their partner was instrumental for that goal than if they thought about either how their partner was instrumental for another goal or what they liked about their partner.

Finally, we tested the prediction that weaker intentions to pursue the focal goal would predict higher relationship commitment, but only for participants in the focal-goal condition.

We regressed relationship commitment onto condition, planned goal pursuit, and the Instrumentality Condition × Planned Goal Pursuit interaction. As predicted, the interaction was significant, $F(2, 84) = 3.23$, $p = .04$. Follow-up tests revealed that the association of planned goal pursuit with relationship commitment was negative in the focal-goal condition, $r = -.44$, $p = .02$, but nonsignificant in both the control-goal condition, $r = -.10$, $p = .62$, and the control-nongoal condition, $r = -.17$, $p = .34$. That is, among women primed with thoughts about how their partner helped them achieve their health and fitness goals, greater outsourcing (i.e., greater reduction in the women's motivation to work hard on the goal) predicted greater relationship commitment.

General Discussion

In three studies, a subtle and positive manipulation—asking participants to write down one way in which their romantic partner helped them with a given goal—negatively affected goal-directed effort. In Experiments 1 and 3, after thinking about how their partner helped them achieve their health and fitness goals, participants planned to spend significantly less time and effort pursuing those goals in the upcoming week. In Experiment 2, after thinking about how their partner helped them achieve their academic goals, undergraduate participants spent significantly more time procrastinating, leaving themselves less time to pursue a subsequent academic task that they believed could increase their academic success. The outsourcing effect was stronger when participants were depleted (Experiment 1) and when they believed that procrastinating was resource consuming (Experiment 2). Greater outsourcing also predicted higher reports of commitment to the instrumental partner (Experiment 3), a finding that points to possible relational benefits of relying on one's partner for help with goals. The outsourcing effect was observed among both student and community samples, and for two different goal domains (health and fitness and academic achievement). Although we did not counterbalance the goals within the studies (e.g., assigning the health goal to be focal for some participants and the career goal to be focal for others), the null effects of the manipulation on goal commitment in Experiment 1 suggest that even if preexisting differences in goal commitment existed, they did not drive the effects.

These experiments contribute novel empirical support for interdependence theory, which posits that goal facilitation is the raison d'être of close relationships and that close relationships have profound opportunities to influence personal-goal pursuit (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Kelley, 1979). Although scholars who study relationships tend to conceptualize dependence as derived from a partner's unique ability to satisfy relational needs, such as those for intimacy and sexual contact (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992), our findings suggest that dependence may also arise from a partner's unique ability to help with pursuit of personal goals.

These studies also document a novel phenomenon, self-regulatory outsourcing, which may lead to exciting new directions for research on how relationship partners affect self-regulation. In particular, our findings suggest the possible existence of a process akin to transactive memory (Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991) in the self-regulation domain. Research has suggested that romantic partners have a shared system of encoding and retrieving information in which they rely on each other's memories (Wegner et al., 1991). Similarly, we suggest that partners may develop shared self-regulatory systems, or "transactive self-control," relying on each other for help with self-control. Individuals who rely on their romantic partner for help with self-control in one area may be able to conserve valuable resources for other goal pursuits. If so, such a shared self-regulatory system—although it could ironically undermine short-term outcomes, as in the case of the outsourcing phenomenon shown here—could ultimately benefit partners if it allowed them to best make use of their limited self-control resources over time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Although we studied romantic relationships, such effects should hold for all interdependent relationships (e.g., those with family and close friends).

2. Similar progress items were included in Experiments 2 ("I have made good progress on my academic achievement goals lately"; "I am pleased with my progress in academic achievement") and 3 ("I feel satisfied with my progress on my academic achievement goals lately"), and were similarly unaffected by the independent variables. All effects remained robust while controlling for perceived goal progress.

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