

CHAPTER 22

The Effects of Self-Regulation on Social Relationships

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Why does it matter if someone can push himself to run another mile on a dreary February morning or stop himself from reading online sports news at work? In other words, what are the downstream consequences of self-regulation? A large body of research within personality, organizational, and social psychology has demonstrated that self-regulation has significant consequences for the individual. Good self-regulators—those who can withstand temptations, persist through obstacles, and delay gratification, for example—are likelier to be physically healthier, more successful in their careers, and experience more life satisfaction and well-being (Bandura, 1982; Baumeister, Heather-ton, & Tice, 1994; Emmons, 1986; Locke & Latham, 2002; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989).

Given the ubiquity of self-regulation efforts in everyday life, and the fact that many acts of self-regulation occur within social contexts, the consequences of self-regulation likely extend beyond self-directed accomplishments to social and interpersonal relationships as well. However, until recently, most empirical research on self-regulation has neglected its consequences for relationships with others. This neglect of interpersonal consequences is surprising given that self-regulation is crucial for social success even in informal social settings. Imagine a day care playgroup or a tailgate party: No one likes the kid who wails when she can't get her way, and no one likes the drunk who throws up on the lawn. Indeed, so crucial is self-regulation to humans' social well-being that researchers have theorized that it may have evolved primarily to serve this function (Baumeister, 2005; Heatherton & Vohs, 1998; Rawn & Vohs, 2006).

In this chapter, we discuss support for the importance of self-regulation in social contexts by examining its role within one particular—and important—social context: that of close relationships. (Although we focus on close relationships, we also review research involving broader social contexts when the research has immediate relevance for close relationships.) We present research from a number of different programs of study that highlight the direct relationship consequences of *self-regulation*, defined broadly as the processes by which the self alters its own responses or inner states in a goal-directed manner (see Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007; Rawn & Vohs, 2006). We discuss the relationship consequences of *self-regulatory strength* (how much self-regulation people have), *self-regulatory content* (what people are regulating toward), and *self-regulatory strategies* (how people self-regulate).

PART 1: SELF-REGULATORY STRENGTH

Given the high everyday interdependence of most close relationship partners, the self-regulation abilities of one partner have unavoidable fallout for the other partner (Kelley, 1979). If one partner struggles with self-control, the other partner suffers. If one partner takes on a challenging goal pursuit, his or her resources for relationship goals are depleted. Low levels of self-regulatory strength are likely a major vulnerability in a close relationship partner, while high levels are likely a major asset. In this section, we discuss how close relationships are affected by the strength of the self's regulatory abilities.

Individual Differences in Self-Regulatory Strength

Individuals vary in the degree to which they can self-regulate successfully in everyday life. According to one prominent model, exertions of self-regulation depend upon a limited, unitary resource, *self-regulatory strength* (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Just as some individuals have more physical strength than others, so too do some individuals have more self-regulatory strength—more reserves of this limited capacity to engage in self-control efforts—than others.

Several lines of research have demonstrated that individual differences in self-regulatory strength have important implications for interpersonal relationships. Scholars have measured these individual differences—which assess the degree to which individuals are successful at regulating their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors in a goal-directed manner—with self-reports, cognitive tasks, and behavioral tasks. In typical research employing self-reports, participants indicate their agreement with items assessing general self-regulatory success (e.g., “I am able to work effectively toward long-term goals”). Such research demonstrates that individuals who report greater (vs. lesser) self-regulatory success in general also report superior relationship functioning: They respond to partner offenses more constructively and less violently, experience less family conflict and less anger, and have better communication skills (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

In typical research assessing individual differences in self-regulatory strength with cognitive tasks, participants perform a computer-based task assessing their facility at overriding automatic cognitive responses. For example, the Stroop (1935) task, perhaps the most famous of these cognitive self-regulation tasks (also called *executive control*

tasks or executive functioning tasks), requires that participants override their automatic tendency to read the name of a certain color (e.g., *red*), instead reporting the color of the font in which that name is printed (e.g., *blue*). Individuals vary in their ability to override their automatic tendency to read the word, and this variability functions as a cognitive measure of self-regulation. Research demonstrates that individuals who exhibit strong (vs. weak) self-regulatory ability on these cognitive tasks tend to be more polite and less interpersonally offensive (von Hippel & Gonsalkorale, 2005). In addition, they tend to be more forgiving of a close relationship partner's transgressions, apparently because they are more effective at controlling their ruminations about the transgressions (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, in press).

In typical research assessing individual differences in self-regulatory strength with behavioral tasks, participants perform a laboratory-based task assessing their success at resisting the urge to enact a tempting behavior that is counterproductive to their longer-term self-interest. The most famous example of such research poses young children with a dilemma (Mischel, 1974): They can have a relatively small treat right away (e.g., a marshmallow), or they can wait for an unknown period of time for a more desirable treat (e.g., two marshmallows). In one study, the number of seconds children delayed gratification (i.e., waited for the more desirable treat) predicted their parents' assessments of their ability to maintain friendships and get along with peers 10 years later (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). In subsequent research, the length of time the children delayed gratification predicted their teacher's positive assessments of their interpersonal functioning (less aggressive behavior and greater peer acceptance), at least for socially insecure children (Ayduk et al., 2000). Whereas the ability to delay gratification did not predict interpersonal functioning among socially secure children, it appeared to be crucial in helping rejection-sensitive children manage their social anxieties in socially acceptable ways.

Situational Fluctuations in Self-Regulatory Strength

Many recent studies have looked beyond individual differences in self-regulatory ability to examine how situational factors can influence self-control and, consequently, alter relationship processes. According to the strength model of self-regulation (Baumeister, Vohs, et al., 2007; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), just as physical exertion can exhaust a muscle, self-regulatory exertion can exhaust self-regulatory strength, thereby impairing performance on subsequent tasks requiring self-control. A number of studies have now found evidence that depleted self-regulatory resources impair interpersonal functioning. For example, depletion produces ineffective self-presentation (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005): Relative to nondepleted individuals, depleted individuals tend to talk too much, to be arrogant, or to self-disclose inappropriately. Depletion also negatively affects individuals' behavior during relationship conflicts (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Relative to nondepleted individuals, depleted individuals tend to respond in a less constructive, more retaliatory fashion to relationship offenses. Recent research has applied these ideas to the domains of interpersonal aggression and intimate partner violence (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Finkel et al., 2009). In one study, participants either engaged or did not engage in a depleting attention-regulation task prior to experiencing or not experiencing a provocation by their romantic partner (Finkel et al., 2009). The experimenter then informed participants that they had been randomly assigned to the role of

director, and their partner to the role of actor, for a yoga pose task. Participants determined how long their partner had to maintain body poses; they were told that maintaining the body poses would be painful for their partner, but would not cause any long-term physical damage. Depleted participants forced their partner to maintain these body poses 68% longer than did nondepleted participants, but only if their partner had provoked them. In the absence of provocation, depletion had no effect on assigned pose duration, presumably because nonprovoked participants had no aggressive impulses to inhibit in the first place.

→ A follow-up study examined how bolstering self-regulatory strength may generate positive relationship consequences over time. The strength model not only predicts that exerting self-regulation depletes self-regulatory strength in the short run but also that people can bolster their self-regulatory strength over time with training (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006). In one study (Finkel et al., 2009), participants attended two laboratory sessions, ² weeks apart, at which they were depleted before they completed a self-report measure of intimate partner violence. This measure asked participants to indicate how “physically aggressive” they would be in response to a series of partner transgressions (e.g., “I walk in and catch my partner having sex with someone”). In the ² week period between the laboratory sessions, participants were assigned either to one of two self-regulation systematic bolstering regimens (controlling either their verbal or physical behavior during everyday tasks) or to a no-intervention control condition. Participants in both bolstering regimens exhibited a significant reduction in their self-reported aggressive tendencies from the first to the second session, whereas participants in the control condition exhibited no change. These findings suggest that strengthening general self-regulatory ability leads to improved relationship functioning.

PART 2: SELF-REGULATORY CONTENT

In addition to the *amount* or *strength* of self-regulatory ability, another important aspect of self-regulation that impacts social relationships is the *content* of the self-regulatory pursuit. By definition, self-regulation is directed toward some kind of outcome or end state, and the content of that end state has implications for relationships. Again, given the high interdependence of many close relationships, the content of one partner’s personal goals has fallout for the other partner: If one partner aims to lose weight before the holidays, then this has consequences for the other partner (e.g., to eat more healthfully whether he or she wants to or not). This is perhaps even more true for interpersonal goals. If one partner aims to build a closer relationship, this has consequences for the other partner (e.g., to spend less time with friends and more time with the partner).

Beyond these obvious practical effects of one partner’s goal content on the other partner’s everyday life, the content of each partner’s goals has important consequences for the well-being of the relationship. In this section, we discuss two illustrations of how goal content affects relationships. First, we describe a program of research that outlines a goal content model of relationship phenomena, outlining how the pursuit of different interpersonal goals influences relationship well-being. Second, we describe several programs of research that examine the impact of personal goals on individuals’ feelings about partners who make those goal contents more versus less likely to be realized.

Interpersonal Goal Content

One of the most well-documented self-regulatory challenges within close relationships is to balance the content of two competing goals—to promote the health and well-being of the relationship, and to protect the self from rejection and pain (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). These goals are often incompatible: First, to promote the goal of maintaining a happy, healthy romantic relationship, people must engage in actions oriented toward the relationship, not the self. To be responsive and committed partners, people need to “put themselves out there,” to become dependent on their partners, to rely on them for help, to express love and caring—essentially, to behave in ways that would make any subsequent rejection even more painful. Unfortunately, then, the very actions that encourage satisfaction of a relationship-promoting goal are the same actions that threaten satisfaction of a basic self-protection goal: to minimize vulnerability to rejection and hurt. Similarly, the actions that help to satisfy the self-protection goal (behaving dismissively toward the partner, distancing, etc.) are damaging to relationship well-being (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2000). Murray and her colleagues (2006) refer to the process by which individuals cope with these two conflicting goals as *risk regulation*. If close relationship partners hope to maintain satisfying relationships, then they must regulate their thoughts, feelings, and actions to overcome self-protective motivations in favor of relationship-promoting ones.

According to the *risk regulation model* (Murray et al., 2006), people regulate their dependency (their willingness to make themselves vulnerable to the pain of rejection or hurt) by relying on beliefs about their partner's regard for them: When people feel loved and respected by their partner, that positive perceived regard gives them the “psychological insurance” to inhibit self-protection goals, and to push themselves to be good partners (Murray, 2005). Experimental studies have demonstrated that people with high and low self-esteem (presumed to differ in chronic perceptions of the extent to which their partner values them) react differently to rejection worries. People with high self-esteem tend to respond to such worries in a compensatory fashion, drawing even closer to their partner and viewing their partner even more positively. In contrast, people with low self-esteem tend to respond to relationship worries by distancing from their partner and viewing him or her negatively, protecting themselves from the potential sting of future rejection (e.g., Murray et al., 2003).

In one illustrative experiment (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002), high and low self-esteem participants believed that their partner, sitting behind them at another table, was writing a long list of complaints about their relationship, when the partner was actually listing the contents of his or her apartment in great detail. Participants with high and low self-esteem responded to this powerful anxiety invocation by feeling less confident about their partner's regard. However, people with high self-esteem, who had that “psychological insurance” provided by a history of positive perceived regard, responded to these rejection concerns by reporting greater closeness to their partner and enhancing their positive view of their partner's qualities. People with low self-esteem, who did not have strong resources of positive perceived regard to draw upon, responded to rejection concerns self-protectively by derogating and reporting less closeness to their partner (Murray et al., 2002). Thus, people rely on a positive sense of their partner's esteem to help them regulate their behavior in a relationship-promoting manner.

→ This body of research suggests that as interdependence increases within a close relationship, it presents a crucial goal content conflict. People must balance two goal end states: to be safe from rejection threat and to have a healthy relationship. The incompatibility of the content of these two goals (and the approach taken by the individual to resolve this conflict) has important consequences for relationships, determining changes in relationship satisfaction and commitment, and predicting relationship dissolution (Murray et al., 2006). For our purposes in this chapter, research on risk regulation illustrates how the content of people's close relationship goals can influence the quality of those relationships.

Personal Goal Content

→ While the previous section described one program of research on the content of *relationship* goals, this section describes research on the content of individuals' *personal* goals. People want things for themselves: They want to do well in school; they want a nice home; they want to relax every day after work. In this section, we describe several independent lines of research that examine the impact of such personal goals on the way people feel about their close relationship partners.

Specifically, all of these programs of research suggest that people's individual or personal goal pursuits can lead to either positive or negative relationship outcomes, depending upon whether the partner is helpful, supportive, or instrumental in bringing about those goal outcomes; that is, the way people feel about their relationship partners is shaped by the extent to which these relationships make it likelier that the self will move toward those desired outcomes.

Grounded in interdependence theory, several models of relationship functioning have noted that close relationship partners have many opportunities to facilitate or to obstruct each other's personal goal pursuits within everyday interactions, and have suggested that each of these small or large influences on goal pursuit has been theorized to generate a corresponding emotional response to the partner (Kelley, 1979). The *emotions-in-relationships model* has perhaps most clearly explicated the role of goal facilitation and obstruction in relationship well-being (Berscheid, 1983, 1991; Berscheid & Ammazalorso, 2001; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005). According to this model, emotional experiences result from disruptions or synchronies in the "meshed interaction sequences" of everyday relationships, such that positive or negative emotions result when significant others affect each other's goals (Berscheid, 1983; 1991). So, when one partner wants to improve her academic performance, she will feel more positively about a partner who helps that goal end state become a likelier reality.

A recent program of research integrated interdependence theorizing about goal facilitation in interpersonal relationships with a social cognitive approach to understanding self-regulation (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2002), to examine the notion that relationship outcomes depend on the extent to which partners have positive versus negative effects on each other's personal goal progress (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008, 2009). In a series of experiments, participants first nominated close others who had positive effects on their personal goal progress (i.e., *instrumental* others), and those who had no effect on their personal goal progress (i.e., *noninstrumental* others), then

completed goal activation tasks (Bargh et al., 2001) designed to bring to mind important personal goals. Recently activated goals for academic achievement and fitness affected closeness to relationship partners, such that people felt closer to others whom they perceived as instrumental for achieving activated goals, and less close to others whom they perceived as noninstrumental for achieving those goals. In one study, after completing an academic achievement goal-priming task, participants reported increased closeness to achievement-instrumental friends (e.g., study partners) and decreased closeness to achievement-noninstrumental friends (e.g., hiking partners).

→ Follow-up studies suggest that relationship partners' instrumentality generates positive relationship outcomes (and lack of instrumentality generates negative relationship outcomes) primarily when partners are instrumental for achievement of goals currently high in *motivational priority* relative to other goals (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2009). When goals drop in motivational priority—that is, when they become less of a priority in terms of progress than other goals—individuals stop showing an evaluative preference for others who are instrumental in achieving those goals. Instead, individuals tend to switch allegiances, preferring others who are instrumental in achieving the goals that are currently high in motivational priority. Thus, the relationship benefits that accrue from being instrumental for achievement of any of a relationship partner's goals are likely to fluctuate over time, as the goal fluctuates in priority for the partner. That being said, many close relationship partners are instrumental in achieving multiple important goals, and as such, the positive relationship benefits they accrue from helping their partners make progress are unlikely to be fleeting.

Indeed, the body of research on the *Michelangelo phenomenon* has demonstrated long-term positive consequences for relationship partners who help each other make progress on *ideal-self goals* (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; for a review, see Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2010), such as becoming more confident, more sophisticated, and closer with God. This research has found that individuals are especially likely to make progress toward achieving their ideal-self goals to the degree that partners treat them as if they already possess the desired end states. We reviewed this research in detail in our companion chapter (Finkel & Fitzsimons, Chapter 21, this volume), but we highlight one important aspect of it that is particularly relevant here: Individuals whose partners help them make progress toward their ideal self experience greater relationship well-being across time than do individuals whose partners do not (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2010; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009).

Thus, individuals feel more positively about partners who promote movement toward important personal goals and, over time, promoting partner growth leads to increased relationship well-being. A separate program of research examines similar ideas from a nomothetic rather than idiographic perspective on goals, demonstrating that partner instrumentality is particularly important to the extent that it helps individuals fulfill the fundamental psychological needs all humans share. According to research on *self-determination theory* (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2001), individuals have three basic psychological needs: (1) *relatedness*, or the need to care for others and to feel that those others care for them; (2) *autonomy*, or the need to be self-governed and agentic; and (3) *competence*, or the need to feel capable and effective. When these needs are fulfilled, individuals experience psychological well-being; when they are thwarted, individuals suffer (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Having a partner who helps to fulfill

one's basic needs (especially the needs for relatedness and autonomy) predicts greater felt security (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000), as well as greater relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Recent research suggests, however, that not everyone shows a preference for useful relationship partners: The relationship commitment of individuals with high attachment anxiety does not depend on a romantic partner's instrumentality for need fulfillment (Slotter & Finkel, 2009); such individuals tend to remain committed to their relationship even when it fails to advance fulfillment of their core needs.

Whether through explicit offerings of support (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996), partner affirmation, role modeling, or myriad other subtle and not so subtle efforts, partners can greatly impact each other's achievement of everyday personal goals. As forecasted by interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979), empirical research on the influence of others on individuals' self-regulation has demonstrated that this influence ultimately drives relationship well-being, such that people feel most satisfied with relationship partners who promote their achievement of important personal goals.

PART 3: SELF-REGULATORY STRATEGIES

The research described in the first two sections of this chapter explained relationship behavior by looking at the strength and the content of individuals' self-regulatory pursuits. In contrast, the research described in this section focuses on the broader processes or strategies with which any goal (personal or interpersonal) can be pursued; that is, the research we discuss in this section suggests that individuals' *strategies* for self-regulation impact relationship outcomes. Specifically, we address the potential role of *general motivational orientations*—the manner, style, or fashion in which individuals approach their goal pursuits—in close relationship contexts.

Approach and Avoidance Goal Orientations

First, we describe the burgeoning literature examining the role of approach and avoidance goal pursuits in relationship contexts (see Gable, 2006). According to this research perspective, goals can be conceived of in terms of approaching a positive outcome (i.e., *approach goals*) or in terms of avoiding a negative outcome (i.e., *avoidance goals*) (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Covington, 2001; Gray, 1990). Thus, the self-regulatory domain of the end state or outcome is undefined: People can approach or avoid achievement, health, or financial outcomes—but what differs is the strategic orientation people take to get to that end state. For example, individuals might pursue the goal to have a successful relationship with an approach strategy (e.g., emphasizing the pursuit of positive experiences, such as bonding and intimacy) or with an avoidance strategy (e.g., emphasizing the avoidance of negative experiences in one's relationship, such as conflict and rejection) (Gable, 2006).

The degree to which individuals adopt approach and avoidance goal orientations in their relationships has wide-ranging implications for relationship dynamics. For example, when assessing how satisfied they are with their relationship, individuals with strong approach goals weight positive relationship circumstances (e.g., passion) more heavily

than do individuals with weak approach goals, whereas individuals with strong avoidance goals weight negative relationship circumstances (e.g., insecurity) more heavily than do individuals with weak avoidance goals (Gable & Poore, 2008).

Individuals vary not only in the degree to which they adopt approach and avoidance motivations toward their relationship in general but also in the degree to which they adopt such motivations toward specific aspects of their relationships. For example, individuals vary in the degree to which the sacrifices they make in their relationship stem from approach or avoidance motives. Whereas approach motives for sacrifice (assessed as agreement with an item such as "I want to develop a closer relationship with my partner") predicted greater relationship adjustment, avoidance motives for sacrifice (assessed as agreement with an item such as "I do not want my partner to think negatively about me") predicted diminished relationship adjustment (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005).

Individuals also vary in the degree to which their sexual behavior is motivated by approach or avoidance motives. Whereas approach motives for engaging in sexual contact with one's partner predicted greater relationship adjustment, avoidance motives for engaging in sexual contact predicted diminished relationship adjustment (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). Even general relationship goals predict sexual dynamics in relationships, with strong (vs. weak) approach goals toward the relationship buffering individuals against declines in sexual desire over time and predicting elevated sexual desire during daily sexual interactions with their partner (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008).

Promotion and Prevention Goal Orientations

Complementing this research linking approach and avoidance goals to relationship outcomes is research linking regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008) to relationship outcomes. Regulatory focus theory shares with approach and avoidance theories of motivation the idea that individuals approach pleasure and avoid pain, but it also suggests that individuals can pursue both of these end states via two different orientations: promotion focus and prevention focus. When in a *promotion focus*, individuals emphasize gains versus nongains; they eagerly pursue opportunities for advancement and strive to ensure that they do not miss out on such opportunities. When in a *prevention focus*, individuals emphasize losses versus nonlosses; they vigilantly pursue security and strive to avoid any threats to this security. Promotion and prevention orientations or foci are theoretically orthogonal to approach–avoidance orientations: People can approach gains or avoid nongains (promotion), and can approach nonlosses and avoid losses (prevention). Like approach and avoidance orientations, promotion and prevention orientations are not domain specific—people can take a promotion or prevention orientation toward any goal end state—but refer to the strategies people take to get to those end states. Within the context of close relationships, promotion goals emphasize the presence or absence of relationship growth and advancement, while prevention goals emphasize the presence or absence of relationship security and maintenance.

Scholars have only recently started to investigate the myriad implications of regulatory focus theory for relationship processes. One line of research examines the link between individual differences in regulatory focus and romantic alternatives (Finkel, Molden, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2009). Relative to predominantly prevention-focused

individuals, predominantly promotion-focused individuals more readily attend to, more positively evaluate, and more vigorously pursue alternative partners. Moreover, the negative association of commitment to a particular romantic partner with evaluations of alternatives to that partner is weaker for promotion-focused than for prevention-focused individuals.

Promotion and prevention orientations also influence the forgiveness process (Molden & Finkel, 2010). Specifically, regulatory focus moderates the links between trust and forgiveness on the one hand, and commitment and forgiveness on the other. In a series of studies, *trust*, an index of expectations of positive future treatment, predicted forgiveness more strongly for individuals in a promotion focus than for those in a prevention focus, presumably because promotion-focused individuals are especially sensitive to the prospect of future gains. In contrast, *commitment*, an index of an orientation toward relationship maintenance, predicted forgiveness more strongly for individuals in a prevention focus than for those in a promotion focus, presumably because prevention-focused individuals are especially sensitive to the potential dangers of deviating from the status quo.

One additional line of research has examined how the regulatory orientations of both partners interact to predict relationship well-being (Bohns et al., 2009). Although abundant evidence (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007) suggests that similarity predicts attraction and relationship well-being more strongly than does complementarity (with the dominance–submissiveness dimension serving as an important exception; Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003), Bohns and colleagues (2009) tested the idea that complementary regulatory focus orientations bolster relationship adjustment, because they allow the partners to coordinate their behavior in a way that allows them to pursue tasks in ways that are appealing to each of them. This division of labor lets promotion-focused individuals pursue tasks requiring eager strategies, and prevention-focused individuals pursue tasks requiring vigilant strategies. Results supported this idea, but only for relationships characterized by high levels of interdependence or goal compatibility (Bohns et al., 2009); it seems that it takes couples some time to figure out how to divide labor, but complementary couples (one promotion-oriented partner and one prevention-oriented partner) are happiest once they have had the opportunity to coordinate their goal pursuits.

Finally, research has suggested that different close relationship contexts may encourage the primacy of promotion or prevention orientations (Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). Because of the early stage and the forward-looking aspects of dating relationships, research suggests that dating couples may primarily seek promotion goals in their relationships, such as “to take our relationship to the next step” or “to not miss out on opportunities for closeness,” while married couples have a broader motivational orientation that also includes prevention goals, such as “to maintain a healthy sex life” or “to avoid getting divorced.” If promotion goals are predominant in their relationships, dating couples should be most receptive to support that matches that general goal orientation. Indeed, in a longitudinal study of dating and married couples, the authors found that although perceived support for both promotion- and prevention-oriented goals was linked with positive relationship outcomes, the association was strongest when the perceived support matched the motivational context of the relationship itself; that is, participants in dating relationships felt more positively about partners who promoted their promotion goals, while married couples felt more positively about partners who supported both their promotion and their prevention goals (Molden et al., 2009).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have reviewed research on how self-regulatory strength, content, and strategies affect interpersonal relationships. Clearly, more is known about the consequences of some aspects of self-regulation than others, and the low-hanging fruit for the next decade is plentiful. For example, not much is known about the effects of different relationship goals (i.e., the content of self-regulation) on relationship outcomes. Few models of close relationship phenomena have taken a self-regulation approach (cf. Read & Miller, 1989). The body of work by Murray, Holmes, and colleagues (e.g., Murray et al., 2003) on the conflicts between self-interested and relationship-interested goals represents an important exception. Although this conflict may be fundamental, there are surely other ways to categorize the many goals people pursue in relationships. Furthermore, one exciting area for future research is the match or compatibility of goal contents between partners. Goal compatibility or coordination, on the one hand, and goal conflict, on the other, are at the core of interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979; Murray et al., 2009), yet little is known about the effects of these variables on relationships. In addition, although this chapter has reviewed the rapidly growing body of research examining the effects of self-regulation on relationship outcomes, it has neglected the nascent body of research examining the effects of *partner regulation* (when one partner tries to lead the other partner to change some aspect of his or her relationship behavior) on relationship outcomes (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009).

These promising future directions notwithstanding, the achievements over the past decade are impressive. For example, today's scholars understand the relationship implications of having strong versus weak self-regulatory strength, of prioritizing self-protection goals versus relationship enhancement goals, and of the strategic orientations people take toward goal pursuit. One issue is that scholars who have created the knowledge in one of these domains are sometimes unfamiliar with work taking place in the others. Our hope in writing this chapter is that linking these diverse areas of research together will alert scholars who are not experts in all of these domains to the solid foundation that now exists for increasingly integrative programs of research on the effects of self-regulation on relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of this chapter was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant awarded to Gráinne M. Fitzsimons and a National Science Foundation grant (No. 719780) awarded to Eli J. Finkel. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the agencies. Authorship ordering was determined by flipping a Loonie.

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