Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals:
Associations with Well-Being in Unmarried and Married Couples

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Abstract

Perceived emotional support from close relationship partners in times of stress is a major predictor of well-being. However, recent research has suggested that, beyond emotional support, perceived support for achieving personal goals is also important for well-being. The present study extends such research by demonstrating that associations of perceived goal-support with well-being differ depending upon both how people represent their goals and the general motivational context in which they pursue these goals. Among unmarried romantic partners, in which the context of the relationship presumably is largely attainment-oriented, perceived support for attainment-relevant, or promotion-focused, goals independently predicted relationship and personal well-being, whereas perceived support for maintenance-relevant, or prevention-focused, goals did not. In contrast, among married partners, in which the context of the relationship presumably is both attainment- and maintenance-oriented, perceived support for both promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals independently predicted well-being. Implications for forecasting and improving well-being among married couples are discussed.

Keywords: well-being; regulatory focus; social support; self-regulation; close relationships
Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals: Associations with Well-Being in Unmarried and Married Couples

The relationships we form have profound influences on our psychological functioning. One primary source of this influence is the support relationship partners provide through the setbacks and triumphs we regularly experience. Indeed, the perceived support of those who are important to us is among the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction, happiness, and overall well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Myers, 1992; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988).

Research on social support and well-being has often focused on perceived emotional support in times of stress (Cutrona, 1996; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). However, recent studies have also explored the role of perceived partner support for achieving personal goals. Feeney (2004) has shown that perceived encouragement from romantic partners while discussing personal goals predicts immediate increases in self-esteem, positive mood, and beliefs that these goals are achievable. Brunstein, Dangelmayer, and Schultheiss (1996) have further shown that feeling that romantic partners understand and assist in goal-pursuit predicts increased positive mood and greater progress toward goal-completion four weeks later (see also Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988). Drigotas, Rusbult, and colleagues (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitten, 1999) have even demonstrated that believing a romantic partner affirms and elicits one’s personal aspirations predicts increased relationship well-being, increased personal well-being, and perceived attainment of these aspirations several months later.

Thus, perceived support for personal goals also appears to make important contributions to well-being. However, much research has shown that not all goals are created equal. The distinct goals people adopt, and their distinct representations of these goals, can fundamentally alter goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Elliot, 2006; Higgins, 1997; Molden & Dweck, 2006). The present study therefore integrates research on perceived support for personal goals and research on goal-pursuit processes to investigate how support by romantic partners for different types of personal goals has different implications for well-being.
Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goal Pursuit

Goals differ in many ways, but one broad distinction long made by psychologists concerns those primarily focused on advancement, growth, and development versus those primarily focused on security, safety, and protection (Maslow, 1955). Building upon this distinction, Higgins (1997) has proposed that not only do concerns with advancement versus security define different types of goals, but that people represent and experience advancement-oriented goals (promotion concerns) differently than security-oriented goals (prevention concerns).

Promotion concerns revolve around attainment; they are represented as pursuing hopes and aspirations that ensure advancement and experienced as accomplishing positive outcomes (i.e., gains; Higgins, 1997). In contrast, prevention concerns revolve around maintenance; they are represented as upholding responsibilities and obligations that are necessary to ensure security and experienced as ensuring protection from negative outcomes (i.e., non-losses; Higgins, 1997). When promotion-focused, people (a) favor attaining new achievements over maintaining current achievements, (b) value goals involving attainment or outcomes perceived as gains, and (c) persist on tasks where success promises rewards. In contrast, when prevention-focused, people (a) favor maintaining current achievements over attaining new achievements, (b) value goals involving maintenance or outcomes perceived as protecting against losses, and (c) persist on tasks where success promises safety from penalties (Brodscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; see Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

Experiences of Goal Support in Unmarried and Married Couples

Because promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals evoke different representations and experiences, associations between well-being and perceived-support for these distinct goals may further depend upon one’s relationship with the partner providing the support. Studies have shown that the specific person providing support, and the match between the support provided and one’s current needs, affects how this support influences well-being (Cutrona & Russell, 1990;
Promotion- and Prevention-Focused Support

Dakoff & Taylor, 1990). Similarly, we hypothesize that associations of well-being with support for different types of goals may also vary by the broader motivational context of the relationship. Perceived support by relationship partners for one’s own generally promotion-focused or prevention-focused goals may have a higher correspondence with well-being in relationship contexts that themselves generally evoke promotion or prevention concerns, respectively.

People tend to view both aspirations and responsibilities as highly important, and all close relationships involve some concerns with both advancement and security. Therefore, correlations between well-being and perceived support for both promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals should exist across most relationship contexts. However, we propose that the motivational context of relationships between unmarried romantic partners is predominantly attainment-focused (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Unmarried partners may primarily evaluate their relationship in terms of how it is advancing and whether intimacy and interdependence is growing and developing. Within this attainment-oriented (promotion-focused) relationship context, partners could then experience perceived support for their own generally promotion-focused goals (hopes, aspirations) as particularly relevant for relationship and personal well-being. Furthermore, given this largely attainment-focused context, unmarried partners may be relatively less mindful of the security their relationship provides and the more maintenance-oriented (prevention-focused) investments in the relationship they are sustaining. Compared to support for their promotion-focused goals, unmarried partners could thus experience support for their own generally prevention-focused goals (responsibilities, obligations) as less relevant for well-being. That is, for these individuals, weighed against their other relationship concerns, perceived support for fulfilling prevention-focused goals may seem less central to the larger motivational context of the relationship, and may thus be less associated with well-being.

In contrast, we propose that the motivational context of relationships between married partners is broader and more maintenance-focused (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Once married, people’s investments in their partner (both materially and psychologically) increase dramatically,
and they are more centrally dependent upon this relationship for fulfilling their needs (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, beyond continuing to evaluate whether their spouse is someone with whom their intimacy can grow, married individuals may more thoroughly evaluate their relationship in term of the security it provides and the investments they are maintaining. Within this increasingly maintenance-oriented relationship context, perceived partner-support for prevention-focused goals may seem just as centrally relevant for the relationship, and be just as strongly associated with well-being, as perceived partner-support for promotion-focused goals.

Overall, we therefore hypothesize that, when considering the independent influences of perceived partner-support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals, promotion-support, but not prevention-support, should uniquely predict higher relationship and personal well-being among unmarried partners. In contrast, both promotion-support and prevention-support should uniquely predict higher well-being among married partners.

Method

Participants

Participants were 92 unmarried heterosexual couples and 77 married couples from Chapel Hill, NC recruited via advertisements. On average, members of unmarried couples were 22.06(SD=3.62) years old and had been together for 22.31(SD=18.24) months. The majority (58%) were cohabitating and none had children. Most were Caucasian (72%, with 5% African-American, 16% Asian-American, 3% Hispanic, and 4% “other”). They were well-educated (2% had post-collegiate degrees, 30% had college degrees, 37% had completed some college, and 31% had high-school degrees) with a median individual income of $15-$20,000 annually.

On average, members of married couples were 33.74(SD=10.75) years old and had been married for 72.02(SD=104.46) months. All were cohabitating and a minority (26%) had children. Most were Caucasian (81%, with 9% African American, 2% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% “other”). They were highly educated (43% had post-collegiate degrees, 40% had college degrees,
10% had completed some college, and 7% had high-school degrees) with a median individual income of $20-$30,000 annually.

Procedures

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires that included an 8-item assessment of perceived partner-support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals (see Appendix). We examined associations between perceived goal-support and both relationship well-being—as assessed by reported trust in (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), and feelings of intimacy, satisfaction, and agreement with, one’s partner (i.e., dyadic adjustment; Spanier, 1976)—and personal well-being—as assessed by one’s own subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Ratings of trust and subjective well-being could range from 0(low) to 8(high), whereas ratings of dyadic adjustment could range from 0(low) to 141(high). To ensure that associations of perceived support with well-being could be tested independent of other relationship processes that affect well-being, measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and anxious and avoidant attachment orientations (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) were also included. All questionnaires had high reliability within both the unmarried and married samples ($\alpha$s=.78–.94).

Results

Data from individual relationship partners were nested within couple; to account for this nonindependence, we employed multilevel analyses that modeled variance at the lower level (within-couple) and higher level (between-couple) simultaneously (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Following the recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), we treated intercept terms as random and slope terms as fixed.

Table 1 displays mean scores for unmarried and married participants on all primary variables.1 Table 2 displays the simple, zero-order associations of perceived partner-support for promotion-focused or prevention-focused goals with measures of relationship and personal well-being for unmarried and married participants. As expected, both types of perceived support generally predicted higher well-being within both types of relationships.
To further examine how different types of perceived support were uniquely related to well-being for unmarried and married couples, regressions were conducted in which perceived promotion-support and prevention-support were entered simultaneously as predictors, along with relationship status (0=unmarried, 1=married), Status X Promotion-Support, and Status X Prevention-Support terms. We have proposed that variations in associations of perceived partner-support with well-being are related to variations in the specific motivational context of relationships between unmarried and married partners. However, demographic differences between unmarried and married individuals might alter the context of these relationships in many other ways. To control for such demographic differences, variables representing age, income, education-level, cohabitation, and number of children were also added to the regression models, as was a variable representing gender.²

Results presented in Figures 1-3 illustrate that none of the Status X Promotion-Support interactions was significant ($t_s<1.20$, $p_s>.26$), indicating that such support was not differentially associated with well-being for unmarried and married partners. However, significant (or marginally significant) Status X Prevention-Support interactions for trust, $\beta=.38$, $t(136)=2.19$, $p=.03$, dyadic adjustment, $\beta=.21$, $t(135)=1.73$, $p=.09$, and subjective well-being, $\beta=.32$, $t(137)=1.95$, $p=.05$, revealed that associations of perceived prevention-support with well-being were indeed stronger for married than unmarried partners. Follow-up simple-effects analyses within each relationship type, shown in Table 3, further revealed that, whereas perceived promotion-support independently predicted higher well-being for both unmarried and married partners, perceived prevention-support independently predicted higher well-being only among married partners. Controlling for possible psychological (rather than demographic) differences between unmarried and married partners, including self-esteem and attachment orientations, in the above analyses produced virtually identical results (although independent associations between perceived promotion-support and subjective well-being dropped to marginal significance).
Discussion

As hypothesized, associations of perceived partner-support for personal goals with relationship and individual well-being depended upon (a) the type of goals that were supported, and (b) the relationship within which support occurred. Support for both attainment-oriented (promotion-focused) and maintenance-oriented (prevention-focused) goals showed simple associations with well-being among both unmarried and married romantic partners. However, for unmarried partners, whose relationships are presumably more attainment-oriented than maintenance-oriented (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), perceived support for promotion-focused personal goals independently predicted greater well-being, but perceived support for prevention-focused personal goals did not. In contrast, among married partners, whose relationships are presumably equally attainment- and maintenance-oriented (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), perceived support for both promotion- and prevention-focused personal goals independently predicted well-being.

Previous research has typically found that unmarried and married partners show similar associations between perceived support for personal goals and well-being (Brunstein et al., 1996; Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999; Feeney, 2004). However, the present study suggests that perceived partner-support for growth-oriented goals and attaining one’s own aspirations may only predict well-being when it occurs within a relationship context emphasizing attainment (as is often equally true of married and unmarried romantic partnerships), whereas perceived support for security-oriented goals and maintaining one’s own obligations may only predict well-being when it occurs within a relationship context emphasizing maintenance (as is often more true of married partnerships). Furthermore, although past research has demonstrated that associations of perceived support with well-being differ by the specific kind of support people currently desire (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), the current study expands this perspective by illustrating how the broader motivational contexts relationships create, and the various types of goals that relationship partners may support, also play a role in determining such associations.
The present research is limited by relying upon cross-sectional samples, but it still has implications for how well-being might change as couples transition from romantic partners to spouses. The emergence of perceived support for prevention-focused goals as an independent predictor of well-being among married partners suggests that people considering the increased dependence marriage will bring could increasingly contemplate concerns about relationship maintenance and reevaluate their partner in terms of perceived prevention-support. Thus, such support may uniquely predict which couples decide to marry. Alternatively, people may only begin to evaluate their well-being in terms of perceived prevention-support after they marry. Thus, such support may instead uniquely predict how satisfied spouses are and whether they remain married. In either case, encouraging couples to consider partner support for both their promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals before marriage could potentially reduce the likelihood of divorce. Longitudinal research spanning the transition to marriage could provide further insight on this question.

To conclude, the present study demonstrates that support for different types of goals predicts well-being in different relational contexts. Additional research pursuing such an integration of goal pursuit and social support literatures could produce further insights into the crucial role of social relationships in psychological functioning.
References


as sculptor of the ideal self. Behavioral affirmation and the Michelangelo phenomenon.


Footnotes

¹Data from a separate sample of unmarried and married individuals has also revealed no general differences by marital status in people’s individual promotion or prevention motivations $t_s(575)<1.47, ps>.14$ (Molden, Strachman, & Finkel, 2008).

²Analyses including Status X Age, Age X Promotion-Support, Age X Prevention-Support, Status X Gender, Gender X Promotion-Support, and Gender X Prevention-Support interaction terms revealed that none of these was significant and they were dropped from the regression equation. Relationship duration was recorded as months exclusively-dating for unmarried partners, but as months married for married partners; thus, this variable could not be included in the overall regression model. However, including duration in separate analyses conducted within each relationship type did not alter any of the results reported, nor did duration significantly moderate associations between promotion- or prevention-support and well-being for either unmarried or married partners.
Author Note

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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Trust in one’s romantic partner among married and unmarried couples as predicted by perceived support for one’s personal promotion-focused goals (a) and prevention-focused goals (b). Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 SD above and below the mean of these variables.

*Figure 2.* Dyadic adjustment among married and unmarried couples as predicted by perceived support for one’s personal promotion-focused goals (a) and prevention-focused goals (b). Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 SD above and below the mean of these variables.

*Figure 3.* Subjective Well-Being among married and unmarried couples as predicted by perceived support for one’s personal promotion-focused goals (a) and prevention-focused goals (b). Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 SD above and below the mean of these variables.
Table 1.

Mean Ratings of Perceived Partner-Support for Promotion-Focused or Prevention-Focused Goals and of Trust, Dyadic Adjustment (DAS), and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) for Unmarried and Married Couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Unmarried M</th>
<th>Unmarried SD</th>
<th>Married M</th>
<th>Married SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prom. Support</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prev. Support</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS***</td>
<td>92.86</td>
<td>11.89</td>
<td>107.14</td>
<td>15.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* ***=p< .001

All variables were measured on 0-8 scales, except for DAS which was measured on a 0-141 scale.

Unmarried and married participants did not significantly differ in their overall levels of perceived support or well-being except for DAS. In both samples, DAS was assessed using a 30-item measure that eliminated two items from the standard questionnaire (i.e., agreement between partners concerning “handling family finances” and “household tasks”) that
may not have been equally applicable for unmarried couples.
Table 2.

Zero-Order Associations between Perceived Partner-Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals and Trust, Dyadic Adjustment (DAS), and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) for Unmarried and Married Couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Unmarried Promotion</th>
<th>Unmarried Prevention</th>
<th>Married Promotion</th>
<th>Married Prevention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>8.29***</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>6.82***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>7.87***</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>6.98***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>5.33***</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>4.85***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ***=p< .001

Perceived partner-support for promotion-focused goals and perceived partner-support for prevention-focused goals were each entered individually into multilevel regression analyses performed separately within the samples of unmarried and married participants.
Table 3.

*Independent Associations between Perceived Partner-Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals and Trust, Dyadic Adjustment (DAS), and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) for Unmarried and Married Couples*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>4.25***</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>3.32***</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWB</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>2.16*</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *=p<.05; **=p<.01; ***=p< .001

Perceived partner-support for promotion-focused goals and perceived partner-support for prevention-focused goals were entered simultaneously into multilevel regression analyses performed separately within the samples of unmarried and married participants.
Appendix

Perceived support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused personal goals were measured by agreement, from 0(Not at All) to 8(Completely), with the following items.

Promotion-Support

My partner thinks I excel at attaining my aspirations in life.
My partner feels confident that I can fulfill my hopes and dreams.
My partner behaves in ways that help me fulfill my hopes and dreams.
My partner elicits from me the person I aspire to be, in terms of hopes and accomplishments.

Prevention-Support

My partner thinks I excel at living up to the responsibilities to which I am committed.
My partner feels confident that I can fulfill the obligations to which I am dedicated.
My partner behaves in ways that help me live up to the obligations to which I am committed.
My partner elicits from me the person I think I ought to be, in terms of responsibilities and obligations.
(a) Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused Goals

(b) Perceived Support for Prevention-Focused Goals
Figure 2 - TOP

(a) Perceived Support for Prevention-Focused Goals

(b) Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused Goals