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Highlights

- Research on “self-regulation” typically views goal pursuit as a “self” process
- The Transactive Goal Dynamics model offers a new conceptualization of goal pursuit
- This model and recent research suggest that goal dynamics are inherently social
- People set, pursue, and achieve goals targeted at their own and others’ outcomes

Abstract

With friends, family members, romantic partners, and coworkers, people form interdependent units, shaping each other's everyday experiences. According to the Transactive Goal Dynamics model, goal pursuit occurs within these units, not apart from them. As a result, a great deal of goal pursuit is interpersonally driven and influenced. Although historically, social psychological research has focused on the intrapersonal drivers of goal pursuit, recent research has also highlighted the interpersonal drivers. In this article, we review research that goes beyond the independent agent view of goal pursuit, exploring how people possess and pursue goals that are affected by and oriented towards their relationship partners.

Goal Interdependence

Michelle has a goal to finish reading a long article before bed. Justin has a goal to increase his running pace. John has a goal to build his retirement nest egg. Their success or failure at these goals will depend on their goal-relevant orientations and internal states—Michelle is mentally drained after a long day of writing; Justin loves to push himself to new heights; John is skilled at delaying gratification. These are three individual agents, pursuing three independent goals, and their success is determined by their internal skills and resources.

Is there anything missing with such a picture of goal pursuit? From the perspective of the vast majority of research on goal pursuit in the social psychological literature, the answer is “no”. The field’s dominant characterization of goal pursuit is one of independent individuals, free of social influence, engaged in self-directed action. From the perspective we describe here, the answer is an emphatic “yes”. Our alternative characterization of goal pursuit is one of interdependent relationship partners, embedded in relational ties with others, engaged in action both directed at and shaped by others as well as themselves. From this view, Michelle, Justin, and John are not alone in their goal pursuits. To understand their success, scholars must also consider their relationship partners, who are fundamental players in their goal pursuits—people like Michelle’s husband Kelly, who is staying up late to chat with a friend on the West Coast; Justin’s coworker Christian, who recently completed a grueling 250 km cycling race; and John’s partner Linda, who wants to spend her life savings to build a country house in Provence.

Michelle and her husband Kelly like to go to sleep at the same time, so his late-night phone call gives Michelle more reason to continue reading. Justin’s coworker Christian recently completed a grueling cycling race, inspiring Justin to set higher standards in his own pursuits.

John's partner Linda's new goal of building a country house in Provence has led John to change his investment strategies for retirement.

In this article, we present a diverse set of new research findings, which, taken together, suggests that social psychology's historically asocial approach has created an incomplete, and often inaccurate, representation of goal pursuit. Goal pursuit is not the stuff of lone wolves. It is the stuff of wolf packs. This article describes research that seeks to understand the dynamics of goal pursuit within these packs—that is, within relationships with family, romantic partners, coworkers, and friends.

The assumption of independence

The desire for experimental control, scientific rigor, and theoretical clarity have led researchers interested in self-regulation and goal pursuit, understandably, to focus on individuals in rather isolated conditions – alone in a laboratory cubicle or on a computer. Accompanying these individually-oriented methodologies is a strong tendency to form theories of goal pursuit that start and end with the individual agent. To be sure, this rich and robust literature has provided many important insights about self-regulation [1,2,3]. However, in neglecting interpersonal factors, it draws a narrow picture of goal pursuit. In a recent effort to create a fuller picture, we (along with Michelle vanDellen) introduced a new framework, the Transactive Goal Dynamics model [4], which conceptualizes goal pursuit in terms of three orthogonal variables: who possesses the goal, who pursues the goal, and whose outcomes are the target of the goal (see Figure 1).

Consider a married couple, Alice and John, each (or both) of whom possesses goals for Alice's or John's (or both's) outcomes, and each (or both) of whom pursues those goals. When John possesses and pursues a goal oriented toward his own outcomes, such as to lose weight or

earn a promotion, his action is represented in Cell 1 in Figure 1. That type of pursuit—the independent agent case—reflects the overwhelming proportion of the psychological literature on self-regulation and goal pursuit. And certainly, it exists: People do set and pursue self-oriented goals alone and without influence of others. However, by and large, people’s goal pursuit is profoundly social, and thus, understanding it requires a social perspective.

The reality of interdependence: Goal pursuit in the social world

In the remainder of this article, we describe research that highlights the interdependence of goal pursuit within interpersonal relationships, providing examples of recent studies that have moved beyond Cell 1 to the rest of the figure, as well as cases in which multiple cells are active at once. But first, we emphasize that even goal pursuit in Cell 1—a goal possessed by John for himself, and pursued by him alone—is frequently a social process.

A. Interpersonal influences on Cell 1. Performance on achievement tasks such as math tests would seem to be a prototypical example of an independent goal pursuit. And yet, many studies have shown that even this performance is routinely shaped by interpersonal phenomena [5,6,7]. Female engineers completing a math test performed worse when they had just interacted with a man who behaved in a dominant and/or sexually interested fashion [8]. Participants working alone on achievement tasks performed worse when they first witnessed another person completing the same goal [9]. Racial minority college students increased their academic performance after an intervention targeting their sense of belonging to social relationships [10], and participants working alone on a laboratory task performed better after a brief social belonging manipulation [11]. Participants completing achievement tasks alone performed better after smooth (vs. awkward) interpersonal interactions [12].

In addition, independent pursuit is part of a network of goals [13], and may thus be affected by partners' roles in those other pursuits. For example, individuals with highly conscientious spouses earn higher incomes and are promoted earlier than participants with less conscientious spouses [14]. This effect is partially driven by the tendency to outsource some shared goal pursuits—like housework and other domestic tasks—to more conscientious partners. Thus, even if John himself does 100% of the pursuit of his career goals, and Alice is never involved, she may still play an important role in his success or failure on these goals, by contributing to the pursuit of other shared goals. In addition, if Alice is low in conscientiousness, and fails to progress on some of her own goals, John may find himself spending valuable time and energy on her pursuits, which could undermine his progress on his own self-oriented goals. Thus, in interdependent relationships, especially those in which the two partners value and support each other, it is clear that the assumption of goal independence is unwarranted. Even Cell 1, the most apparently independent goal pursuit, is often affected by relationship partners.

B. Cells 2, 4, 5, and 7: Possessing goals targeted at other people's outcomes. In everyday life, partners hold goals not only for their own outcomes, but also for other people's outcomes. Parents have goals for their children's educational and career outcomes [15], spouses have goals for each other's health and career success [16,17], and managers hold goals for their employees' productivity and performance [18]. For example, John may want Alice to lose weight. These partner-oriented goals often shape both partners' behavior, leading to substantial changes in pursuit over time [17]. John may try to eat healthier around Alice, because he hopes to be a positive influence; Alice may try to exercise more, to please John, or she may react against his goal and overeat [19]. In turn, partner-oriented goals also affect the target's goal outcomes. For example, when parents hold mastery (vs. performance) goals for their children's

educational experience, children go on to earn higher grades [20]. Thus, Cells 2, 4, 5, and 7 could not be explained by an “independent agent” account of goal pursuit—these actions are driven by partner-oriented, not self-oriented, goals.

C. Cells 2, 3, 6, and 7: Pursing goals directed at a partner’s outcomes. In everyday life, people not only *possess* goals that are directed at other’s outcomes (cells 2, 4, 5, and 7), they also *pursue* goals that are directed at other’s outcomes (cells 2, 3, 6, and 7)—regardless of who has set those goals. For example, John may support Alice’s attempt to start a new career by introducing her to his peers in that industry, regardless of whether John or Alice has set this goal for her (or whether both of them have done so). The huge literature on social support demonstrates the importance of these partner-oriented pursuits for goal progress, health, and well-being [21,22,23,24].

Indeed, this tendency to contribute to other people’s goal pursuits emerges early in life, with even infants and toddlers trying to help others achieve their goals [25]. For example, in one study, three-year-old children helped an adult with the adult’s goal to get a third party’s attention [26]. The children’s action, whether guided directly by the adult’s goal, or perhaps by a mediating goal to please the adult, was clearly intended to advance the adult’s goal. Thus, an analysis of the situation that focused exclusively on either the child or the adult would miss important goal dynamics. To accurately explain behavior in Cells 2, 3, 6, and 7, it is crucial to include the goals of relationship partners.

D. When multiple cells are active at once: The important cases of joint goals and joint pursuits. Other recent studies have begun to explore a neglected topic in traditional social psychological research: goals that people set or pursue together. Friends study for exams together, married couples set a monthly budget, coworkers aim to wow a client with their

presentation. In Figure 1, these goals are reflected by combinations of cells—for example, Alice is pursuing a goal for Alice to get an A (Cell 8), and John is pursuing the same goal for himself (Cell 1). Research has suggested that these joint goals and pursuits are more motivating than independent pursuits [27,28,29]. For example, a study of 5,000 overweight participants in a team-based health program found that participants lost more weight when their teammates shared their weight loss goal [30]. Similarly, participants working alone in the laboratory on word puzzles showed greater intrinsic motivation when exposed to cues of working together with others [27].

However, the effects of pursuing goals together are not uniformly positive for both partners. Some partners—such as those who commonly engage in more goal pursuit—may be expected to pull more weight [31]. Indeed, low self-control actors are particularly dependent on high self-control partners [32], who may not benefit from this partnership. Indeed, in recent research studying self-control decisions in dyads (also see [33]), high self-control in one partner was undermined by low self-control in the other partner [34]. When married couples were mixed—when there was one high self-control and one low self-control partner—their savings and health behaviors were as poor as couples with two low self-control partners. Thus, in joint pursuits, as when both partners are trying to save money or eat healthy, one partner's weaknesses can undermine the other partner's goal progress. If these researchers had looked only at one member of the dyad, they would have found surprisingly weak predictors of individual self-control for savings and health outcomes.

As another example of how cells can combine to affect goal outcomes, research in health psychology has found strong evidence for the importance of parental monitoring in the health outcomes of adolescents with chronic illness. For example, when parents monitor a child's

diabetes management—checking to make sure the child brings the injector to school, reminding the child to check insulin levels—they are engaging in pursuit of a goal directed at the child's outcomes (Cell 2, 3, 6, or 7). In one recent paper, researchers demonstrated that the positive effect of parental monitoring on diabetes outcomes is mediated by the adolescent's own self-care behaviors [35], showing that one partner's pursuit of a partner-oriented goal can affect the other partner's pursuit of that goal. So if Alice helps John by reminding him to pack a lunch, he may be likelier to make healthy choices later that day as well. Thus, one person's pursuit reflects not only his own self-regulation, but also the involvement of others, behind the scenes. By extending the analysis beyond Cell 1 to allow for combinations of cells—that is, to allow for goal interdependence across partners—we are better able to understand goal pursuit in everyday life.

Conclusions

From the perspective of the Transactive Goal Dynamics model, the social psychological literature has given insufficient recognition to the role that other people play in “self-regulation.” As a result, the dominant perspectives on this process have fundamentally mischaracterized how people set, pursue, and achieve goals in their everyday lives. A new wave of empirical findings has started to identify the profound ways in which goal processes are, at their foundation, social. With this new and growing realization of the interdependent nature of goals, we anticipate that going forward, research will offer a deeper understanding of how and when people achieve goal success rather than failure.

Figure 1: Goal Pursuit in Interdependent Relationships

| | | <u>John Has Goal</u> | | <u>Alice Has Goal</u> | |
|------------------|----------|----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| | | John is Target | Alice is Target | John is Target | Alice is Target |
| John is Pursuer | 1 | 2 | John is Pursuer | 5 | 6 |
| Alice is Pursuer | 3 | 4 | Alice is Pursuer | 7 | 8 |

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- This article presents a new theoretical model of goal pursuit, which suggests that relationship partners' goals, pursuit, and outcomes affect each other in a dense network of goal interdependence, ultimately becoming so tightly linked that the two partners are better described as one single system. This is the first model of goal pursuit to take an interpersonal, rather than an intrapersonal, perspective.
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This research examines a longitudinal sample of married partners. Participants earned higher incomes and were more satisfied with their jobs to the extent that they were married to highly conscientious spouses. People's professional success is typically assumed to reflect their own goal-relevant characteristics, but this finding shows that one person's success also reflects their partners' goal-relevant characteristics.

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This paper describes research on young children's efforts to assist adults with their interpersonal goals. Children notice an adult trying to get a third party's attention, and they assist by also trying to get the third party's attention, and direct it to the adult. This paper shows that even very young children have a tendency to get involved with other people's goal pursuits, questioning the assumption that humans are by default independent goal pursuers.

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