

Running Head: OUTSOURCING SELF-REGULATION

Outsourcing Self-Regulatory Effort to Significant Others

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## Abstract

Three studies demonstrate a novel phenomenon—*self-regulatory outsourcing*—in which thinking about how others 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 (vs. career goals) planned to spend less time and effort on health goals in the upcoming week. This pattern was stronger for depleted participants. In Experiment 2, participants who thought about how their partner helped them with academic achievement goals procrastinated more, leaving less time for an academic task, than did participants in two control conditions. This pattern was stronger for participants told that procrastinating would drain their resources for the academic task. In Experiment 3, participants who decreased effort after thinking of an instrumental other (vs. control) reported greater relationship commitment. The possibility for shared or *transactive self-regulation* is discussed.

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## **Outsourcing Self-Regulatory Effort to Significant Others**

Imagine for a moment that no effort was 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, 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 test the effects of instrumental (i.e., supportive or helpful) relationship partners on goal-directed effort<sup>1</sup>. Based on 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, the present article draws upon basic principles in social cognition and motivation science to advance the opposite hypothesis—that such thoughts are motivationally undermining, causing individuals to make less ambitious goal-pursuit plans and to spend less time actually pursuing the goal.

### **Interpersonal Influences on Self-Regulation**

Historically, scholars largely 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, in press; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). The present article extends this 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 do so. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we study romantic relationships, such effects should hold for all interdependent relationships, e.g., family and close friends.

This hypothesis may initially seem counter-intuitive, 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 others could heighten social pressure (e.g., a sense of public commitment) and self-efficacy, which typically enhance motivation. On the other hand, 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 others are also striving to achieve the goal (i.e., *social loafing*) (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979); they also seek to conserve their self-regulatory resources when possible (Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Based on these findings, we suggest that when individuals think about how a partner is instrumental for a given goal, they will feel less motivated to work hard on the goal.

### **Depletion Theory, Resource Conservation, and Self-Regulatory Outsourcing**

This diminished motivation should be particularly influential for individuals whose self-regulatory resources are low. According to *depletion theory*, acts of self-regulation draw upon a limited resource; tapping into that resource to perform one task diminishes the amount available for subsequent tasks, leading to laziness and preference for easier tasks (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). As such, 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, given their drained resources.

If self-regulation resources are limited, then individuals 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. Thus, 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.

### **The Consequences of Self-Regulatory Outsourcing for Relationship Commitment**

We have suggested that thinking about how a significant other helps individuals achieve their goals undermines motivation to expend effort, especially under certain predictable conditions. Next, we

wondered about the consequences of self-regulatory outsourcing for relationships. In line with 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 yield higher 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 predict that individuals who outsource motivation will experience stronger commitment to their partner.

### **Hypotheses and Research Overview**

Our primary hypothesis, the *outsourcing hypothesis*, states that individuals will expend less effort when they think about ways in which a significant other is instrumental for a given goal. The *depletion hypothesis* states that the outsourcing effect should be especially pronounced among depleted individuals, and the *conservation hypothesis* states 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, the *relationship commitment hypothesis* states 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, which tested the outsourcing and depletion hypotheses, participants thought about how a significant other is instrumental for a focal goal (health/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/fitness goal during the ensuing week. In Experiment 2, which tested the outsourcing and conservation hypotheses, participants thought about how a significant other is 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, which tested the outsourcing and relationship commitment hypotheses, employed procedures similar to Experiment 1 and included a relationship commitment measure after the outsourcing task. Experiments 2 and 3 included an additional control condition, in which participants simply engaged in positive thinking about their partner.

## EXPERIMENT 1

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

### Method

Fifty-six women (mean age = 33.10;  $SD = 8.52$ ), 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 two others did not complete the manipulations, and were thus excluded from analyses.

Participants first completed a depletion manipulation modified from Muraven, Gagné, and Rosman (2008), in which they retyped a paragraph that appeared onscreen while skipping all vowels (*low depletion* condition) or while skipping all vowels that appeared two letters after another vowel (*high depletion* condition). Next, participants provided one example of how their partner made it easier for them to do better with their everyday goals. 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 (1 = *much less time* (or *effort*) *than usual*; 5 = *much more time* (or *effort*) *than usual*) ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Finally, participants completed a two-item goal commitment measure ( $\alpha = .96$ ) that asked participants to rate their agreement (1 = *I completely disagree*; 7 = *I completely agree*) with the statements "My health and fitness goals are important to me" and "I care about my progress on my health

and fitness goals,” and rated their perceived goal progress with the item “I feel satisfied with my recent progress on my health and fitness goals” on the same 1-7 scale.

## Results and Discussion

We performed a two-way ANOVA on the planned goal pursuit measure, with both depletion (low, high) and instrumentality (focal goal, 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,  $F(1, 48) = 22.47, p < .001$ , indicating that participants planned to spend less time and effort on their health/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 instrumentality  $\times$  depletion interaction effect 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,  $F(1, 27) = 3.86, p = .06$ .

The same two-way ANOVA conducted on goal commitment and on perceived goal progress produced no significant main effects or interactions, all  $F_s < 1$ . 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 increases in perceived goal progress.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, participants who thought about their partner's instrumentality for their focal health and fitness goals (vs. 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 et al., 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

## **EXPERIMENT 2**

Experiment 2 provided the second test of the outsourcing hypothesis and the first test of the conservation hypothesis. We measured the extent to which participants saved resources for a subsequent goal-relevant task by examining how much time they spent procrastinating on a relatively appealing initial task, described as either consuming resources needed for the subsequent goal-relevant task or not doing so. In line with research on the conservation model of self-control (Muraven et al., 2006), we viewed time spent procrastinating on the first, distracter task as an index of how much they 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 that goal, and that this pattern would be strongest when participants believed that the first task would be particularly draining of resources needed to complete the second task.

Experiment 2 extended beyond 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/fitness), and included an additional control condition, in which participants thought about something they like about their partner. This control allowed us to test our assumption that effects are driven by motivational undermining in the focal goal condition rather than by motivational bolstering in the control goal condition, and to ensure that our effects are not due to positive mood effects (given that positive mood can be de-motivating; Carver & Scheier, 1990). Experiment 2 employed a  $3 \times 2$  design, with instrumentality condition (the focal goal of academic achievement, the control goal of recreation, and the control nongoal) and task framing (non-depleting, depleting) as between-subjects factors, and time spent on distracter task as the dependent measure.

### **Method**

Seventy-seven students (42 women; mean age = 19.68;  $SD = 2.85$ ) completed the study online. Three participants were excluded from analyses because they were not in a romantic relationship. Participants first completed the instrumentality manipulation. In the *focal goal condition*, participants provided one example of how their romantic partner helped with their ongoing academic achievement goals. In the

*control goal condition*, participants provided one example of how their romantic partner helped with any ongoing recreational goal. In the *control nongoal* condition, participants reported something they liked about their partner. Next, they read instructions indicating that they would use the remainder of the study time 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 *non-depleting 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 cut them off after seven minutes.) 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 on the first task, with instrumentality condition (focal goal, control goal, control nongoal) and task frame (non-depleting, depleting) as between-subjects factors.

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

A main effect of task frame also emerged,  $F(1, 68) = 5.39, p = .02$ , indicating that participants spent less time on the distracter 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 non-depleting ( $M = 2.82$ ;  $SD = 1.12$ ).

Finally, as predicted, the instrumentality  $\times$  depletion frame interaction effect was significant,  $F(2, 68) = 3.08, p = .052$ . As shown in Figure 2, when the distracter task was framed as depleting resources for the goal-relevant task, instrumentality condition significantly affected time spent on the distracter task,  $F(2, 30) = 10.83, p < .001$ . Participants in the focal goal condition spent more time on the distracter task ( $M = 3.53; SD = 1.44$ ) than did participants in the control goal [ $M = 1.42; SD = 1.00; F(1, 19) = 15.94, p = .001$ ] or control nongoal [ $M = 1.68; SD = 0.90; F(1, 19) = 13.30, p = .002$ ] conditions. The same pattern was evident when the task was framed as non-depleting ( $M_{FocalGoal} = 3.22, SD = 1.15; M_{ControlGoal} = 2.63, SD = 1.05; M_{ControlNongoal} = 2.59, SD = 1.12$ ), although the effect was not significant,  $F(2, 32) = 1.41, p = .26$ , and none of the conditions significantly differed from each other,  $ps > .16$ .

Participants in both the control goal and nongoal conditions responded to the task framing by spending less time on the distracter task when it was described as depleting than when it was described as non-depleting [control goal:  $F(1, 23) = 8.69, p < .001$ ; control nongoal:  $F(1, 24) = 5.13, p = .03$ ]. In contrast, participants in the focal goal condition spent approximately equal amounts of time on the distracter task across the two framing conditions,  $F < 1$ , a finding that further reinforces these participants' decreased 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 distracter task could interfere with performance on the goal-relevant task.

### **EXPERIMENT 3**

Experiment 3 provided the third test of the outsourcing hypothesis and the first test of the relationship commitment hypothesis. In Experiment 3, we extended beyond the procedures of Experiment 1 by including a partner positivity control condition (as in Experiment 2) and by assessing relationship commitment. We predicted that outsourcing motivation to a partner (by reducing one's own plans to expend effort) would promote commitment to that partner. That is, individuals who respond to the reminder of their partner's helpfulness by reducing their own plans to work on the goal—those who

“outsource” effort—should report stronger commitment to that partner, due to their increased dependence. 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 thus report less 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**

Ninety-nine American women (mean age = 32.49;  $SD = 8.75$ ), sampled from members of a data collection service, completed this study online. The data from six participants were recorded incorrectly because of computer error; three additional participants did not complete the instrumentality manipulation. Data from these participants were excluded from analyses.

First, participants provided one example of how their partner helped them with their everyday goals. 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 (1 = *much less time than usual*; 5 = *much more time than usual*). Finally, they completed a two-item 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”; 1 = *I completely disagree*; 7 = *I completely agree*). These two items correlated at .84 and were combined into one index of relationship commitment.

## **Results and Discussion**

First, we performed a one-way ANOVA on plans to spend time pursuing the focal goal (health/fitness) with instrumentality condition [focal goal (health/fitness), control goal (achievement), control nongoal] as a between-subjects factor. As depicted in Figure 3, a main effect of condition emerged,  $F(2, 87) = 3.96, p = .02$ , indicating that participants planned to spend less time pursuing their focal goal in the focal goal condition ( $M = 2.68; SD = 0.91$ ) than in the control goal condition ( $M = 3.22;$

$SD = 0.85$ ) or 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 when they thought about how their partner was instrumental for that goal, compared with when they thought either about how their partner was instrumental for another goal or about something 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 within the focal goal condition. We regressed relationship commitment onto condition, intentions, and the condition  $\times$  intentions interaction effect. As predicted, the interaction effect was significant,  $F(2, 84) = 3.23$ ,  $p = .04$ . Follow-up tests revealed that the association of intentions with relationship commitment was negative in the focal goal condition,  $r = -.44$ ,  $p = .02$ , but it was 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 helps them achieve their health/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 helps them with a given goal—affected goal-directed effort in a seemingly negative fashion. In Experiments 1 and 3, after thinking about how their partner helps 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 helps them achieve their academic goals, undergraduate participants spent significantly more time procrastinating, leaving themselves less time to pursue an academic task that they believed could increase their academic success. This outsourcing effect was stronger when participants were depleted (Experiment 1) and when they believed that procrastinating was resource-consuming (Experiment 2). It also predicted higher reports of commitment to the instrumental partner (Experiment 3), pointing to possible relational benefits of relying on one's partner for help with goals. The effects occurred among student and community samples, and for both health/fitness and academic goals. Although we did not counterbalance within 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 manipulations on goal commitment suggest that even if pre-existing differences in goal commitment existed, they did not drive the effects.

These findings 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 impact personal goal pursuit (Berscheid & Ammazzalorso, 2001; Kelley, 1979). Although relationships scholars tend to conceptualize dependence as derived from a partner’s unique ability to satisfy relational needs like 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 personal goal pursuits.

These studies also document a novel phenomenon—self-regulatory outsourcing—that may lead to exciting new directions for research on how relationship partners affect self-regulation. Perhaps most interestingly, these results 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 couples 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 couples 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 would produce ironically undermining short-term results like 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.

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## Figure Captions

Figure 1. Planned pursuit of the focal goal (on a 1–5 scale) as a function of depletion (low vs. high) and instrumentality condition (control-instrumental vs. focal-instrumental).

Figure 2. Time spent on distracter task (in minutes) as a function of task frame (depleting vs. non-depleting frame) and instrumentality condition (control-nongoal vs. control-instrumental vs. focal-instrumental).

Figure 3. Planned pursuit of the focal goal (on a 1–5 scale) as a function of instrumentality condition (control-instrumental vs. control-nongoal vs. focal-instrumental).

**Figure 1**

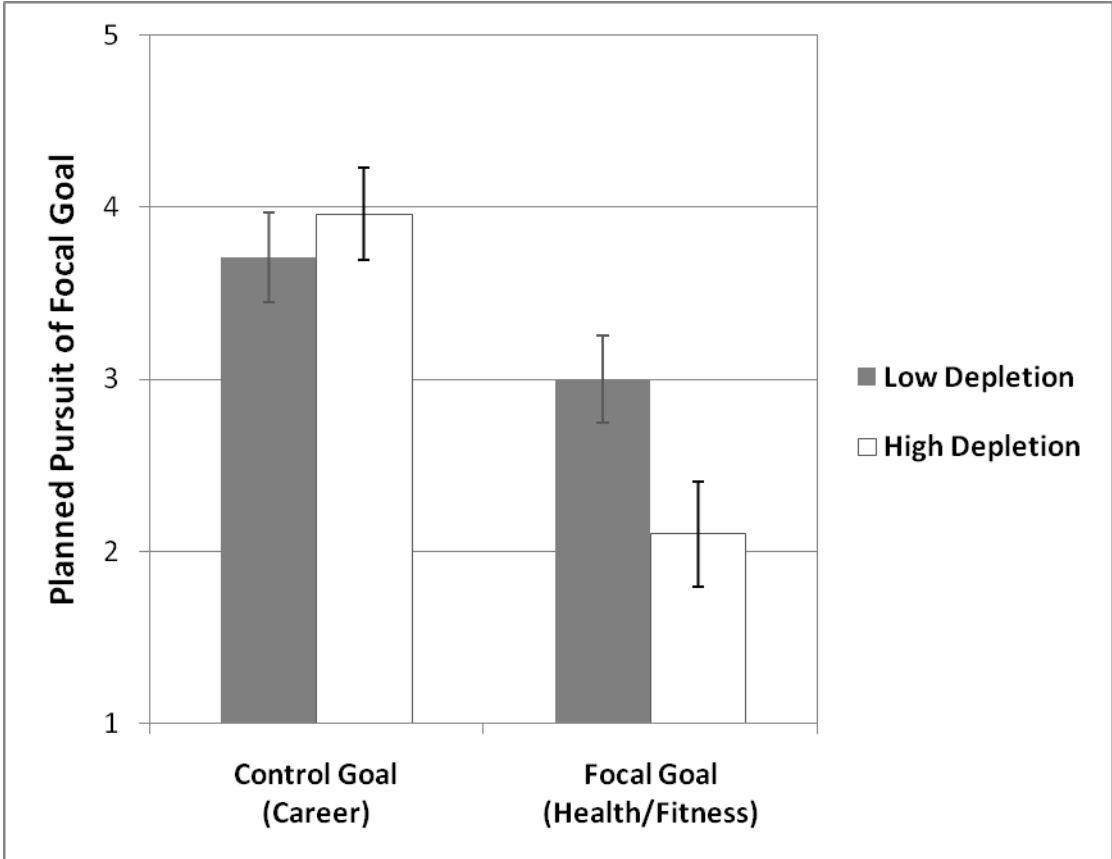
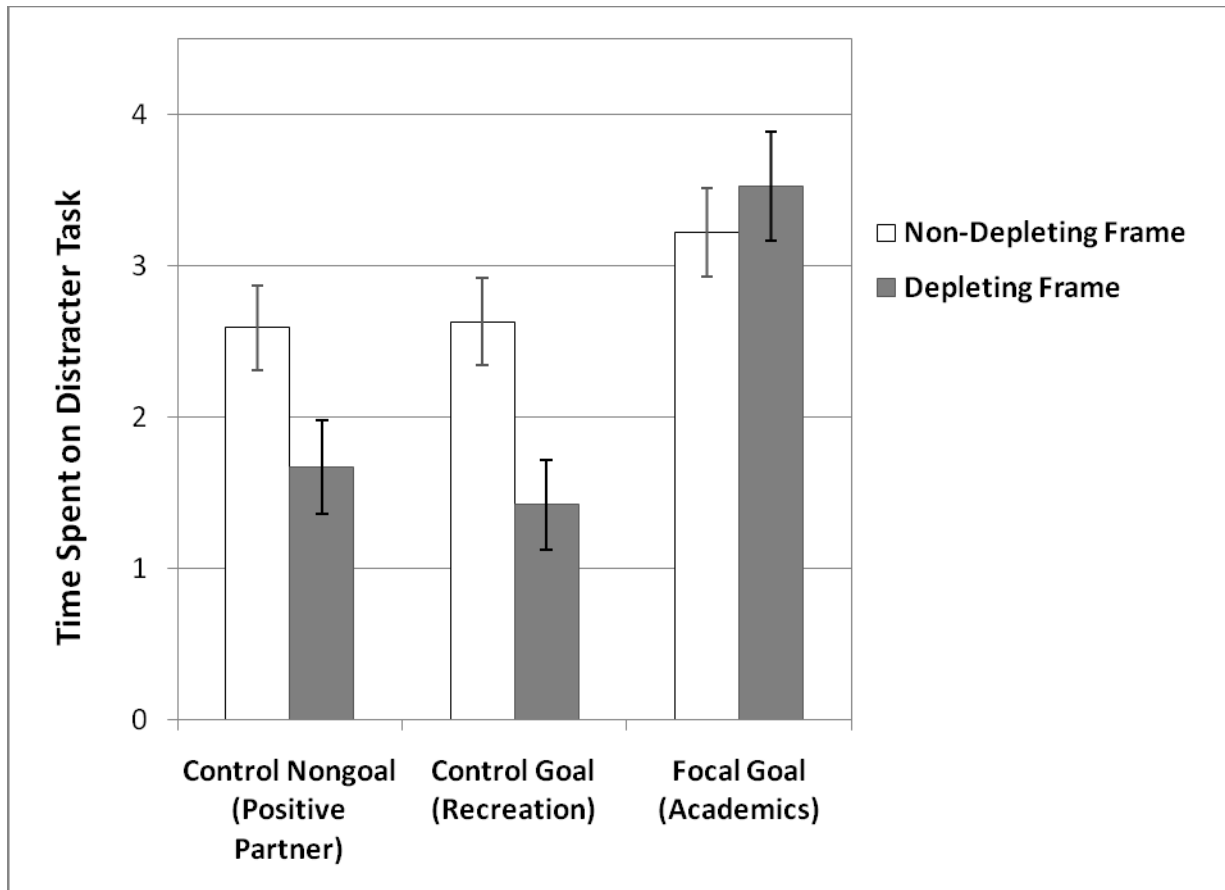


Figure 2



**Figure 3**

