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Goal Difficulty and Openness to Interpersonal Goal Support

Francesca Righetti

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam[1]

Madoka Kumashiro

Goldsmith, University London

Sarah B. Campbell

George Mason University

Abstract

When people pursue important goals, they are often surrounded by close others who could provide help and support for the achievement of these goals. The present work investigated whether people are more likely to be open to such interpersonal goal support from a romantic partner when they perceive their goals as being easy vs. difficult. Using a multiple methods approach, three studies revealed that, compared to the pursuit of easy goals, when people pursue difficult goals, they are less likely to seek out and be open to support from their romantic partner. Studies 2 and 3 revealed that the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support was partially mediated by loss in self-efficacy. Finally, Study 3 revealed that lack of openness to support can have detrimental long-term consequences for the relationship, as it undermines relationship well-being.

Keywords: Goal difficulty, interpersonal goal support, visible support, close relationships

Goal Difficulty and Openness to Interpersonal Goal Support

Successful goal pursuit depends on several factors, such as motivation, skills, luck, and support from close others. Romantic partners can be invaluable resources that enable people to make progress toward the achievement of their most important life goals. Partners can provide both emotional and instrumental support that facilitates goal achievement (for a review, see Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Previous research has shown that when people receive goal support, or experience affirmation of their ideals from their partners, they are more likely to achieve their hopes, dreams and aspirations (e.g. Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Moreover, such interpersonal goal support not only promotes achievement of personal goals, but it also enhances personal and relational well-being (e.g. Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999).

While some goal pursuits are perceived as being relatively easy, sometimes people experience difficulties and obstacles in their goal progress. Given that partners' support can facilitate goal advancement, it would be sensible for individuals to rely on their partners' support when pursuing difficult goals. But are people open and receptive to their partners' support when pursuing difficult goals relative to easy goals? For example, if Mary feels that it would be difficult to receive a promotion at work, would she turn to her partner for support, or would she be reluctant to seek out and take advice from her partner?

In the present work, we examined whether goal difficulty affects people's openness to interpersonal goal support; specifically, we investigated whether individuals would be less likely to be open to receiving their partners' support when they perceive

their goals as being difficult, rather than easy, to pursue. We further sought to examine whether threat to self-efficacy may play an important role in this process. Previous research has shown that receiving social support is often associated with negative outcomes, since support might induce feeling of incompetence and inadequacy (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). If people are already experiencing low self-efficacy because they are pursuing a difficult goal, they might be less likely to seek and be receptive to interpersonal goal support to avoid additional feelings of inadequacy and low competence. Finally, we sought to examine whether perceived goal difficulty and the resulting reduced openness to goal support, in turn, affect relationship well-being.

Interpersonal Goal Support

Close others can play an influential role in individuals' goal pursuits (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Other people can be instrumental for the individual's goal pursuit, facilitating self-regulatory activities that will enable successful goal accomplishment. Previous research has shown that priming a close other who had a certain goal for the self made participants perform a task consistent with the way the close other would have liked them to perform (Shah, 2003). Moreover, individuals whose romantic partners strongly support their goal pursuits are more likely to achieve those goals over time (Brunstein et al., 1996). Research on the Michelangelo Phenomenon (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult, et al., 2009) has repeatedly shown that long-term relationships can significantly influence an individual's most important goal achievements. Close partners can shape one another's goal pursuits in such a manner as to move each person closer to (vs. further from) attaining his or her most desired hopes, dreams and aspirations. Furthermore,

partners can sometimes become so functional for the achievement of personal goals that individuals may even decide to outsource self-regulatory efforts to their partners when pursuing goals (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011).

One important consequence of interpersonal goal support is its effect on relational outcomes. When people make progress towards their goals because of their partners' support, they experience high relational well-being. Achieving goals is gratifying, and relationships which enable such a gratification benefit from this process (e.g. Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009). While pursuing a specific goal, people also tend to approach and positively evaluate others who are instrumental to their goal achievement, while they tend to avoid others who represent obstacles for their goal achievement (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

Thus, previous research has repeatedly shown the important role that partners can play in goal pursuits and the subsequent consequences for relational well-being. However, more research is needed on the conditions that influence people's decisions to utilize others to achieve their goals. Previous research has shown that individual differences in how individuals approach their own goals may make a difference. For example, promotion oriented individuals (i.e., individuals who focuses on gains when pursuing goals) are more likely to be open and receptive to interpersonal goal support than prevention oriented individuals (i.e., individuals who focuses on losses; Righetti & Kumashiro, 2012). Similar findings were shown for individual differences in regulatory mode (Kruglanski et al., 2000), where individuals high in locomotion (i.e., individuals who are quick to act when pursuing goals) were shown to be more receptive to partner support than individuals high in assessment (i.e., individuals who devote a lot of time

evaluating and critically comparing goals and means; Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007) [1]. However, to our knowledge, no research has investigated properties of goal pursuit activities that are likely to influence people's openness to support. We hypothesize that perceived goal difficulty is an important characteristic that affects openness to interpersonal support.

Goal Difficulty and Interpersonal Goal Support

Although close others can be instrumental for personal goal progress and achievement, research on social support also show that receiving support can be associated with negative outcomes and, in particular, with increased negative mood and reduced self-esteem (e.g. Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982). This is especially true for the so-called "visible" support (i.e. support that the recipient is aware of receiving; Bolger et al., 2000; Bolger & Amarel, 2007). For example, Bolger et al. (2000) found that, during a period of acute stress, perceived support from the partner was associated with increased anxiety and depression in the recipient. Fisher et al. (1982) argued that receiving support contains a mixture of beneficial and self-threatening elements. On the one hand, receiving support may signal that the partner cares for the recipient's well-being. On the other hand, receiving support might also represent a threat, in that receiving support lowers the recipient's self-esteem and draws more attention to the problem and the recipient's sense of incompetence (e.g. Fisher et al., 1982; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). When support is perceived as threatening, reactions are usually negative and people are less likely to accept support while being more likely to rely on themselves (e.g. Fisher et al., 1982).

While receiving support might typically introduce a certain degree of threat to people's self-esteem, there are situations in which support might be perceived as especially threatening. For example, when initial feelings of self-worth are already low, people may be more likely to perceive the need for support as highlighting inferiority and inadequacy (Fisher et al., 1982). This idea is supported by numerous studies showing that individuals with low self-esteem are more defensive and less satisfied when receiving support, presumably because they are be more disturbed by the self-threatening components of support (e.g., Hobfoll, Nadler, & Lieberman 1986; Nadler, Fisher, & Streufert, 1976).

When people are pursuing goals that they perceive to be difficult, they may be more likely to experience low self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that one has the ability to succeed in the specific situation; Bandura, 1994). In those circumstances, people might perceive goal support as especially threatening to their self-esteem and sense of competence and might be less open to seeking and receiving such support. Moreover, seeking and receiving support might have self-presentation costs because individuals risk drawing attention to their performance deficiencies (Ashford, 1986; VandeWalle, 2003). Previous research has indeed shown that individuals are less likely to seek help when they feel incompetent, rather than competent, in a task (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Furthermore, people who are learning a task also prefer receiving feedback after successful trials than after poor performance (Bokums, Meira, Neiva, Oliveira, & Maia, 2012; Chiviacowsky & Wulf, 2002). Thus, we argue that, to avoid additional feelings of inadequacy and low competence, people who are pursuing difficult goals, and consequently experience low self-efficacy, might be less likely to display openness to

their partners' support. In the current work, we define openness to support as a general positive outlook regarding support, including high likelihood of seeking and accepting support, being open to sharing hopes and fears about goals with one's partner, and feeling good about one's partner's involvement in the goal pursuit. In fact, all these behaviors have been shown to elicit support (e.g., Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1987; Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, & Miller, 1989; Kaniasty & Norris, 2000; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). Thus, if people want to avoid support, they will be less likely to exhibit those behaviors.

Research Overview

Three studies investigated the effect of goal difficulty on openness to partners' goal support for important, long-term goals. In Study 1, we used an experimental design to test our basic premise that goal difficulty affects openness to support. Study 2 used a correlational design to examine openness to partner support in the context of seeking a new career. In Study 2, we also assessed whether self-efficacy mediates the link between goal difficulty and openness to support. Specifically, we hypothesized that when people experience difficulties in their goal pursuit, they might feel less competent and, in turn, might become less open to goal support in order to avoid further feelings of inadequacy. In Study 3, we gathered data from both partners involved in a romantic relationship and tested our prediction using multiple measurement methods: (a) participants' self-reports of their own and their partners' everyday behaviors; (b) participants' ratings of their own and their partners' behavior during conversations regarding each person's ideal goal pursuits; and (c) trained coders' ratings of target and partner's behavior during conversations regarding each person's ideal goal pursuits. In Study 3, we again assessed

whether self-efficacy mediates the link between goal difficulty and openness to support. Moreover, by employing a longitudinal design, we also assessed the long-term relationship consequences of not being receptive to partners' support. We hypothesized that pursuing difficult goals and not relying on one's partner for goal progress will negatively affect relationship well-being (Rusbult et al., 2009). Finally, in all studies we performed our key analyses controlling for possible confounds.

Study 1

Study 1 examined the effect of goal difficulty on openness to goal support. In a between subject design, we asked participants to recall an easy vs. difficult goal and we assessed participants' openness to partner support of that goal. Because research has shown that goal difficulty can both increase (Higgins, Marguc, & Scholer, 2012) or decrease (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003) goal importance and commitment, and people might be more receptive of support for goals that are important for them (Righetti, Rusbult, & Finkenauer, 2010), we also performed additional analyses controlling for goal importance and commitment. We therefore seek to rule out the alternative explanation that people are less receptive to difficult goals simply because those goals are less important for them or they are less committed to them.

Method

Participants. Participants were 120 individuals (45 women; $M = 31.67$ years old, $SD = 11.06$) who reported that they were involved in a romantic relationship. The average relationship duration was 58.39 months ($SD = 82.45$). Participants were recruited via Amazon.com's mechanical Turk interface. Mechanical Turk is a website where over 100,000 users complete a variety of tasks in exchange of monetary

compensation. Participants were paid $0.30 for their time. Data from 6 participants were excluded from the analyses because they participated in the survey twice. [2] Participants were randomly assigned to the goal condition (easy vs. difficult).

Measures and procedure. First, participants were asked whether they were in a romantic relationship and to report the name of their partner. Participants who were not in a relationship did not continue with this experiment. After the relationship status check, participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. In the easy goal condition, they were asked to report one of their most important goals that they were currently pursuing in which the progress toward its achievement was easy for them. Participants in the difficult goal condition received the same instructions about a goal in which the progress toward its achievement was difficult. We then measured on a 7-point scale (*1 = do not agree at all, 7 = totally agree*) goal difficulty (1 item; "This goal is difficult to achieve"), openness to support (3 items; "I welcome [Partner Name]'s support of this goal", " I carefully listen to [Partner Name]'s support of this goal", and "I embrace [Partner Name]'s support of this goal"; $\alpha = .88$), goal importance (1 item; "This goal is important for me"), and goal commitment (1 item; "I really want to reach this goal"). Finally, participants were debriefed and paid. [3]

Results

As a manipulation check, independent-samples t-test revealed that participants reported that their goal was less difficult to achieve in the easy goal condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.91$) than in the difficult goal condition ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(112) = - 3.65$, $p <$ .001, $\omega^2 = .10$. Consistent with our hypothesis, independent-samples t-test revealed that participants reported being more open to interpersonal goal support in the easy goal

condition ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.96$) than in the difficult goal condition ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(112) = 1.95$, $p = .054$, $\omega^2 = .02$. When we controlled simultaneously for goal importance and goal commitment in an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), the effect remained significant, $F(1, 110) = 4.75$, $p = .031$, $\omega^2 = .03$. Results of an ANCOVA also revealed that goals were not rated as more important in the easy goal condition than in the difficult goal condition, $F(1, 110) = 2.35$, $p = .128$. Participants also did not report to be more committed to easy vs. difficult goals, $F(1, 110) = 0.12$, $p = .733$.

Discussion

The first study showed that people are less likely to be open to interpersonal goal support when pursuing difficult, rather than easy, goals. This effect was not attributable to differences in goal importance or motivation. Although the strength of this study relies on a manipulation of the salience of difficult vs. easy goals, it does not address why people might be reluctant to ask for help when pursuing difficult goals. Furthermore, because we asked participants to bring in mind existing goals (difficult vs. easy), participants might have reported widely different types of goals in the two conditions, although we controlled for goal importance and commitment to the goal. Study 2 was designed to further examine the effects of goal difficulty on openness to support, by focusing on a specific type of goals (i.e., career goals) and by assessing whether self-efficacy mediates the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to examine the association between perceived goal difficulty and openness to support in the context of career goals among people seeking new employment. Perceived difficulty of career goal attainment may especially affect

openness to support from partners, as this is typically an important, time-consuming goal which has potentially significant impact on both members of the couple. Job-seekers in a romantic relationship were recruited to take part in the study and were asked to think about a top goal related to their career search and to indicate the difficulty of this goal pursuit. Participants further reported on their openness to support from their partners, while self-efficacy regarding the goal was measured to examine its potential mediating role in the process. We also sought to ensure that our findings were not attributable to other dynamics that partners might face when pursuing difficult goals and when individuals are unemployed. As in Study 1 we controlled for devotion to the goal to ensure that our findings were not attributable to differences in goal commitment. We also controlled for partners' enacted support and partners' undermining behaviors, to show that openness to goal support is not due to actual levels of partner support or lack of support. It is possible that partners might be less inclined to provide support for difficult goals and, consequently, people might be less open to their partners' support simply because they perceive their partner's reluctance to provide help and assistance. We also controlled for the relational nature of the goal, that is, whether the goal was a personal goal or shared with the partner. It is indeed possible that people might be less open to support of difficult goals that are shared with the partner because they want to avoid dealing with the added complexity posed by the partner's investment in the goal. Finally, we also controlled for financial strain, depression, and anxiety because previous research on unemployed individuals found that factors often associated with unemployment, such as experiencing financial strain and depression, affect couple dynamics and partner

support, causing more conflicts and withdrawal of support (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996).

Method

  Participants. Participants were 101 British job-seekers (66 women; $M = 26.48$ years old, $SD = 6.87$) who were required to be actively searching for a job and either cohabiting and/or married to their romantic partner. Only one partner of a romantic relationship couple was allowed to participate. The average relationship duration was 42.31 months ($SD = 25.49$), and 23% of the participants were married. Participants were informed that they could be already employed but that they had to be actively seeking another job (38% of participants had either full-time or part-time job and 12% were students).

  Measures and procedure. Participants were recruited via notices posted in community centers, job-search sites, and through social and career networking websites like Facebook and LinkedIn, which provided the link to an online survey. Upon completing the survey, which contained other measures not directly relevant to this study, participants were debriefed and paid £10 for their time.

  The survey asked participants to think about a specific important goal related to their career, which they hoped to accomplish within the next 3-6 months. Examples included desire to find a meaningful job or obtain a promotion in their current profession. For the goal, we assessed goal difficulty (1 item; "How easy/difficult is it to achieve this goal in general?"; 1= *very easy*, 7 = *very difficult*) and openness to partner goal support (3 items; "I seek out my partner's support and advice regarding this goal pursuit", "I share my fears and anxieties regarding this goal with my partner"; and "I share my hopes

and wishes regarding this goal with my partner"; 1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*; α = .82). To assess mediation by self-efficacy and to rule out potential alternative explanations, the following items were assessed using a 7-point scale (1= *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*): self-efficacy (1 item; "I am confident that I will achieve this goal"), financial strain (3 items; modified from Vinokur et al., 1996; e.g., "I find it difficult to live on my total household income right now", α = .83), depression (2 items; e.g., "During the past 2 months, I have often been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless", α = .83) and anxiety (2 items; e.g., "During the past 2 months, I have often been bothered by feeling tense, nervous, or anxious", α = .79; both depression and anxiety scales were modified from Spitzer et al.'s 1994 PRIME-MD scale). Using measures created for this study, we also assessed actual levels of partner support (1 item; "My partner supports me in pursuing this goal") and partner undermining behaviors (1 item; "My partner behaves in ways that conflict with my attempts to accomplish this goal"). To ensure that findings were not attributable to avoidance of the goal in general, we assessed devotion to the goal (1 item; "I put in a great deal of my time and effort into pursuing this goal"). Finally, to rule out the impact of goal attainment on their partner, participants were asked to indicate the relational nature of the goal (1 item; "To what extent is this a purely personal goal, or a goal that is directly related to your partner or shared with your partner?"; *-3 = mainly personal, 0 = both personal and relational, and +3 = mainly relational*).

Results

To test whether goal difficulty was associated with openness to support, we conducted a linear regression analysis by regressing openness to support onto goal

difficulty. Consistent with the main hypothesis, results indicated that goal difficulty was negatively associated with openness to support (B = -.28, t(98) = -2.51, p = .014). Further analyses exploring moderation by sex revealed no main effect or interaction of goal difficulty with sex. To rule out potential alternative explanations, we simultaneously regressed openness to support onto goal difficulty, financial strain, depression, anxiety, partner support, partner undermining, goal devotion, and relational nature of the goal. The findings showed that goal difficulty accounted for significant unique variance in openness to partner goal support above and beyond financial strain, depression, anxiety, partner support, partner undermining, goal devotion, and the relational nature of the goal (B = -.24, t(88) = -2.36, p = .024; see Table 1).

Finally, we conducted mediation analyses using the bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) to examine whether self-efficacy mediates the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support. The bootstrap estimates are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. The results revealed that the total effect of goal difficulty on openness to support (total effect = -.27, t(98) = -2.51, p = .014) became marginally significant when self-efficacy was included in the model (direct effect of goal difficulty = - .20, t(97) = - 1.81, p = .072). Thus, self-efficacy partially mediated the effects of goal difficulty on openness to support. Furthermore, the analyses revealed, that the indirect effect was significant, with a point estimate of -0.07 and a 95% confidence interval (CI) of -.15 to - .01.

Discussion

Study 2 showed that when people perceive their goals as difficult to achieve they are less open to interpersonal support. Furthermore, goal difficulty was associated with

interpersonal goal support above and beyond financial strain, depression, anxiety, partner support, partner undermining, goal devotion, and the relational nature of the goal. Finally, Study 2 showed that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between goal difficulty and openness to support. To the extent that individuals perceive their goals to be difficult, they experience a reduction in self-efficacy, which leads them to be reluctant to seek and be receptive to partner's support. The findings of this study were especially revealing of how goal difficulty affects openness to support, since career goals are likely to be among the most important goals people pursue, with considerable implications for the relationship. Nevertheless, this effect relied on self-report measures of all variables. Study 3 was designed to test the ecological validity of our hypothesis, by examining various important goal pursuit activities, examining consequences for the relationship quality, and assessing reports from both partners and from independent observers.

Study 3

Study 3 had several aims. First, we sought to replicate our findings using multiple methodologies (questionnaires and videotaped interactions). Second, we sought convergent validity of our findings assessing openness to support not only as a self-reported measure but also as observed and reported by the partners and by independent coders of the interactions. Third, we assessed whether self-efficacy mediates the association between goal difficulty and openness to support. Finally, we assessed the long-term consequences of goal difficulty and lack of openness on relationship well-being.

In addition, previous research has shown that promotion orientation is positively associated, whereas prevention orientation tends to be negatively associated,

with openness and receptivity to interpersonal goal support (Righetti & Kumashiro,

2012). Given that prevention oriented individuals might be more likely to concentrate on

losses, and thus perceive goals as more difficult, we ensured that our findings were not

attributable to individual differences in promotion and prevention orientation. Therefore,

we performed our key analyses controlling for promotion and prevention orientation,

goal importance, goal commitment, and received support from partners. As in Study 2,

when we analyzed the videotaped interactions, we also controlled for the personal vs.

relational nature of the goal.

Method

   Participants. Participants were couples who took part in research activities in a

five-wave longitudinal study. At Time 1, 187 couples took part in the project (183

heterosexual couples, 4 lesbian couples). At subsequent waves of the study, there were

160 (Time 2), 139 (Time3), 115 (Time4), and 98 (Time 5) couples. At Time 1

participants were 24.97 years old, on average (SD = 11.06). Most couples dated steadily

or were engaged or married (25% dating steadily, 29% engaged, 38% married, 8%

other), and most lived together (84%). On average, participants had been involved with

their partners for 37.58 months (SD = 24.55). To assess whether the couples who

dropped out differed from the couples who remained until the end of our study, we

performed attrition analyses for measures of goal difficulty and openness to support. At

Time 1, couples who persisted until Time 5 did not report more goal difficulty than

couples who dropped out, $t(187)$ = -1.12, p = .265. However, couples who had dropped

out reported less openness to support (M = 7.15, SD = 0.78), than couples who persisted

until Time 5 ($M = 7.38$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(187) = 2.92$, $p = .004$.[4] Couples were paid $50 to

$120 at each time point for participating in the study. [5]

Measures and procedure. Couples were recruited via announcements posted

in the Chapel Hill, NC community. Participants took part in study procedures once every

six months. At each laboratory session, participants completed a questionnaire and, at

Time 1, they also engaged in a videotaped conversation about each person's pursuit of

his or her ideal self goal.

Questionnaire. Participants were asked to think about their ideal selves – "their

goals, dreams and aspirations" – and to identify the six most important goals related to

their ideal self. Participants identified diverse components of their ideal selves, such as

professional goals, interpersonal goals, social goals or personal skills that they wished to

acquire. Given that the top three goals are likely to be the most significant components of

a target's ideal self, we asked participant to reply to some questions about their top three

goals, and combined the responses for the three goals into one measure for each

construct.

For each goal, targets responded on a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 =

agree completely, unless otherwise indicated) on measures of goal difficulty (1 item;

"Pursuing this goal is difficult for me (is too hard, makes me feel bad, requires giving up

things I care about)"; Time1-5 αs for the top 3 goals ranged from .61 to .68), and

openness to support (2 items; "I welcome my partner's support of my pursuit of this

goal", and "I feel good about my partner's attitude regarding my pursuit of this goal";

Time1-5 αs for the top 3 goals ranged from .68 to .79). At Times 3 and 5, targets also

completed a measure of goal importance (1 item; "To become the sort of person you

ideally want to be, how important is it that you achieve this goal?"; *0 = not at all*

important, 8 = extremely important; Time 3 and 5 αs for the top 3 goals ranged from .59

and .62), partner support of goals (1 item; "My partner says and does things that help me

move closer to this goal"; Time 3 and 5 αs for the top 3 goals ranged from .65 and .73),

goal motivation (3 items; "I am strongly motivated to achieve my personal goals", "I am

totally committed to achieving my most important personal goals", and "I am completely

dedicated to moving closer to my ideal self"; Time 3 and 5 αs = .83 and .85), self-

efficacy (3 items: "I have the ability and the skills that are needed to accomplish my

most important personal goals", "I am talented at the activities needed to achieve my

most important personal goals", and "I don't always have the time or energy that I need

to work on my goal pursuits" [reverse-scored]; Time 3 and 5 αs = .54 and .56), and

regulatory orientation using the Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002) scale (18 items;

e.g., for promotion, "Overall, I am more oriented toward achieving success than

preventing failure," and for prevention, "I am more oriented toward preventing losses

than I am toward achieving gains"; *0 = do not agree at all*, *8 = agree completely*; Time 3

and 5 αs = .88 and .88 for promotion, and .85 and .84 for prevention). At all waves in the

study, we also measured targets' relationship well-being using the Dyadic Adjustment

Scale (Spanier, 1976), (30 items; e.g., "How often do you think things are going well

between you and your partner?"; Time1-5 αs ranged from .87 to .92). At Time 1, we

assessed length of relationship in months (1 item; "For how long have you been

romantically involved with your partner?"). Finally, partners also provided their

perception of target's openness to support (2 items; "My partner welcomes my support of

his/her efforts to pursue this goal", and "My partner feels good about my attitude

regarding his/her pursuit of this goal"; Time1-5 αs for the top 3 goals ranged from .78 to .86).

Goal Conversation. At Time 1, we also used observational measures of targets' and partners' behaviors during a discussion of their goals. We asked couples to engage in two conversations – one conversation for each participant's goals. We selected interaction topics from participant's descriptions of their top three ideals, identifying a goal (a) that was important to the participant, (b) that was not yet achieved yet was likely to be achieved during the next five to 10 years, and (c) that the participant was willing to discuss. Partners engaged in a 6-min discussion of one of their goal pursuits (e.g., how might the goal be achieved, are there obstacles to achieving it, what are the implications of this goal for other parts of their lives?).

Following the two conversations, we separated the participants into two different rooms in which the videotaped interactions were replayed. The 6-min video conversation was split in three segments of two minutes each. Participants completed rating scales for the three segments on a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely,* unless otherwise indicated). For each conversation, we developed a single measure of each construct by averaging ratings of target and partner behaviors across the three segments of the conversation. For conversations in which each participant was the target of the goal pursuit (i.e., partners discussed that participant's own goal), targets rated their openness to support (2 items; "I welcomed my partner's support and assistance", and "I showed that I was open to my partner's input about my goal pursuits"; α = .92), and their partner support of their goals (1 item; "My partner said and did things that helped me move closer to my goal"; α =.88). We also assessed targets'

global evaluation of the interaction and measured goal difficulty for the overall

conversation (1 item; "Talking about my goal was difficult for me (was too hard, made

me feel bad)").

For conversations in which each participant was the partner of the targets' goal

pursuit (i.e., partners discussed the targets' goal), partners rated their perception of

targets' openness to support (2 items; "My partner welcomed my support and

assistance", and "My partner showed that he/she was open to my input about his/her goal

pursuits"; $\alpha = .93$).

We also asked two trained coders to independently rate target and partner

behaviors during each conversation. For each conversation, we developed a single

measure of each construct by averaging the two coders' ratings of target and partner

behavior across the three segments of the conversation. On a 5 point scale, we assessed

rejection of support (2 items; "Target demonstrated negative behaviors or rejection of

partner's support", and "Target exhibited negative behavior toward partner"; $\alpha = .80$,

ICC = .61), partner support of the other's goal (1 item; "Partner intended to be helpful

and supportive (irrespective of target's reaction")", the personal nature of the goal that

was discussed (1 item; "Goal was personal (directly relevant only to target, not to

partner)"; ICC = .72) and the relational nature of the goal "Goal was relational (affected

both partners, was relevant to relationship); ICC = .70).

Results

Analysis strategy. Because the data provided by a given participant on multiple

occasions are nonindependent, and the data provided by two partners in an ongoing

relationship are not independent, we analyzed the data of the questionnaire using

hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In our analyses, data obtained at different time points were nested within participants, and data from the two partners in a given relationship were nested within couple, in a 3-level hierarchical linear model. The analyses were performed on the data of the five waves when the variables of interest were assessed at all five points, whereas the analyses were performed on the data of two waves when the variables of interests were assessed only at Time 3 and 5 (i.e. when self-efficacy and goal motivation were included in the analyses). The data of the conversation were analyzed in a 2-level hierarchical linear model, where partners were nested within couples. Because none of our effects were moderated by participant's sex and because we had 4 lesbian couples, dyads were treated as indistinguishable (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) for both the questionnaire and conversation data. We represented intercept terms as random effects and represented slope terms as fixed effects as recommended for couples data (Kenny, Mannetti, Pierro, Livi, & Kashy, 2002). In the questionnaires and conversations, we analyzed both target and partner-perception effects. For clarity, target effects referred to within-person analyses of the effects of Partner A's variables on his or her own self-reported behavior. Partner-perception effects referred to between partners analyses of variables Partner B's perception of Partner A's behavior. Thus, when we analyzed partner-perception effects, we regressed Partner B's report of Partner A's behaviors onto Partner A's self-reported variables.

Questionnaire analyses. To test the hypothesized link between goal difficulty and openness to support we performed regression analyses that tested target and partner-perception effects. To test the target effect, we regressed openness to support onto goal difficulty. As hypothesized, goal difficulty was negatively associated with openness to

support (B = -.08, t(1026) = -7.08, p < .001). To test the partner perception effect, we regressed partner perception of target's openness to support onto goal difficulty. Goal difficulty was negatively associated with partner perception of target's openness to support (B = -.07, t(1010) = -4.75, p < .001). To ensure that the results were valid above and beyond goal importance, goal motivation, partner support of goals, promotion, and prevention orientation, we regressed openness to support and partner perception of target's openness to support simultaneously onto all of the above-mentioned constructs. Results revealed that goal difficulty reliably accounted for unique variance beyond these control variables (B = -.05, t(176) = -3.09, p = .002, and B = -.05, t(175) = -1.79, p =.075; respectively; see Table 2).

Furthermore, we assessed whether self-efficacy mediates the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support. To test for mediation, we used the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008). This method was used to generate a 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect with 20,000 resamples. Significant mediation is indicated when the confidence interval does *not* include zero. Regarding the target effects, the analyses revealed that self-efficacy mediated the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support (indirect effect = 95% CI = [-.021, -.004]; direct effect B = - .07, p < .001). Parallel analyses were performed to test the partner-perception effect. The analyses revealed that self-efficacy mediated the effect of goal difficulty on partners' perceptions of targets' openness to support (indirect effect = .95% CI = [-.014, -.002,]; direct effect B = - .05, p = .062).

Goal Conversation key analyses. To test the target effect, we regressed openness to support onto goal difficulty. As hypothesized, when participants rated their

conversations, goal difficulty was negatively associated with openness to support (B = -.29, t(185) = -9.56, p < .001). To test the partner-perception effect, we regressed partners' perceptions of targets' openness to support onto goal difficulty. Results revealed that goal difficulty was negatively associated with partners' perceptions of targets' openness to support (B = -.17, t(186) = -5.25, p < .001). To ensure that the results were valid above and beyond partners' support of targets' goals and the personal and relational nature of the goals, we regressed openness to support and partners' perceptions of targets' openness to support simultaneously into goal difficulty, partners' support of targets' goals, and personal and relational nature of the goal. Results revealed that goal difficulty remained negatively associated with openness to support and with partners' perceptions of targets' openness to support (B = -.19, t(166) = -6.62, p < .001 and B = -.16, t(166) = -4.63, p < .001, respectively). Finally, we analyzed the overall ratings of the two independents coders. We regressed rejection of support as rated by the coders onto goal difficulty. Results revealed that goal difficulty was positively associated with rejection of support as rated by the coders (B = .06, t(171) = 4.02, p < .001). We also conducted the regression analysis controlling for partners' support of targets' goals, and personal and relational nature of the goal. Goal difficulty was significantly associated with rejection of support (B = .06, t(167) = 4.05, p < .001).

Long-term Relationship Outcomes. To test whether goal difficulty contributes to reduced relationship well-being via less openness to support over time, we performed a mediation analysis with residualized lagged regression analyses.[6] We regressed later relationship well-being simultaneously onto earlier goal difficulty and earlier relationship well-being. Results revealed that earlier goal difficulty negatively predicted later

relationship well-being above and beyond earlier relationship well-being (B = -.36, t(685) = -2.27, p = .024). Furthermore, we regressed later relationship well-being simultaneously onto earlier goal difficulty, earlier openness to support, and earlier relationship well-being. Results of the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008) with 20,000 resamples revealed that earlier openness to support mediated the effect of earlier goal difficulty on later relationship well-being (indirect effect = . 95% CI = [-.159, -.023]; direct effect B = -.27, p = .007). In other words, when people pursue difficult goals, they are less receptive to their partners' support and this deteriorates relationship well-being over time.

Discussion

In Study 3 we sought to gather convergent validity for our findings from Studies 1 and 2 by assessing openness to support with 3 different indexes: (a) participants' self-report, (b) their partners' perceptions, and (c) independent coders' perceptions while observing goal-relevant interactions between partners. All three indexes confirmed that goal difficulty reduces openness to support. These findings upheld after controlling for promotion and prevention orientation, goal importance, goal commitment, received support from partners, and the personal/relational nature of the goal. Furthermore, replicating Study 2, findings of this study showed that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between goal difficulty and openness to support. Finally, this study revealed that goal difficulty undermines relationship well-being. Longitudinal analyses revealed that when people pursue difficult goals, they are less receptive to their partners' support and this deteriorates relationship well-being over time.

General Discussion

Close relationship partners can be important sources of help, suggestions and support for successful goal pursuit. However, results from three studies revealed that people tend to ignore or reject partners' support when it might be most useful, that is, when they are experiencing difficulties in their goal advancement. Using a multi-methods approach, the results of three studies indicated that to the extent that people pursue difficult goals, they are less likely to welcome their partners' support. These effects remained significant when controlling for possible confounds, such as goal importance, goal commitment, actual received support from partners, promotion and prevention orientation, financial strain, depression, anxiety, and relational nature of the goal. Furthermore, Studies 2 and 3 revealed that the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support was partially mediated by self-efficacy. When people pursue difficult goals, the consequent reduction in self-efficacy partially contribute to their reluctance to be open to their partners' support. Finally, Study 3 revealed that not being open to partner support when pursuing difficult goals has detrimental consequences for relational well-being.

This work contributes to the literature on the interpersonal components of goal pursuit (for a review, see Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). The present findings illuminate one of the conditions in which people are more vs. less likely to be open to their partners' support during goal pursuit. Receiving support can be perceived as a threat to one's sense of self-esteem and competence (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Fisher et al., 1982). Our findings demonstrated that when people's sense of competence is already low because they are pursuing difficult goals, they are reluctant to seek and receive support, presumably because support is perceived as especially threatening.

Specifically, we showed that when people pursue difficult goals, they experience uncertainty about their ability to reach their goals (i.e. low self-efficacy) and this, in turn, prompts them to avoid or reject interpersonal goal support.

Importantly, not all difficult goals are likely to decrease one's sense of self-efficacy. For example, when people encounter difficulties in their goal pursuit and attribute those difficulties to external factors, rather than personal skills or internal causes, they might not experience a reduction in self-efficacy and, consequently, they might still be open to support. In fact, in those circumstances, people might not perceive support as particularly threatening because their sense of competence is still intact (Fisher et al., 1982). Future research should investigate whether attribution processes (e.g. locus of control), might indeed moderate the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support. There may be additional factors that might influence whether goals are perceived as difficult or threatening. Future research should also examine other factors that might influence such perceptions and might moderate the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support.

The present work also informs the literature on regulatory focus and interpersonal support. Previous research has shown that prevention oriented individuals are less likely to seek and be receptive to interpersonal support than promotion oriented individuals (Righetti, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011; Righetti & Kumashiro, 2012; Winterheld & Simpson, 2011); the present work provides a possible explanation for those findings. When pursuing goals, prevention oriented individuals concentrate on the possible negative outcomes that they might encounter, and they might therefore perceive goals to be more difficult to achieve than promotion oriented individuals. Because of this

perception, prevention oriented individuals might experience lower self-efficacy and might feel more threatened by interpersonal goal support than promotion oriented individuals. In addition, previous research examining individual differences in another self-regulatory strategy, assessment and locomotion, found that to the extent that individuals were high in assessment orientation, they reported their top goals as being more difficult to achieve (Kumashiro et al., 2007). Given that assessment orientation has been found to be associated with lower self-esteem, fear of failure, need for social comparison, and inaction toward goals (Kruglanski et al., 2000), individuals high in assessment orientation might also perceive their goals as difficult and, consequently, may be less open to partner support.

In many cases, the consequences of not being receptive to interpersonal support can be negative for goal achievement, given the advantages that are often provided by interpersonal support (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1996; Drigotas et al., 1999). Others can provide practical help or they might contribute diverse and creative solutions for our problems. However, although individuals mostly benefit from interpersonal support, sometimes it may also hinder goal achievement. Suggestions and advice may also create distractions from the focal goal, and receiving support might foster feeling of inadequacy and incompetence, which could impair performance.

Gleason, Iida, Shrout & Bolger (2008) have shown that receiving support is a mixed blessing. While it has negative consequences for the individual's distress, it has positive benefits for the relationship, as the recipient feels closer to the partner after being supported. When people avoid support, they might avoid feeling of distress and incompetence but they might also harm the relationship, as they prevent the partner from

showing concern for them and are denied the opportunity of increased interpersonal closeness. Consistent with this idea, our findings showed that pursuing difficult goals and not being receptive to interpersonal support undermines relationship well-being in the long run. Previous research has shown that difficulties and stress in a personal domain (e.g., work), can "spillover" into romantic relationships (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Our findings suggest that one of the reasons why relationships can deteriorate when people experience goal difficulties is that people may be less receptive to their partners' support. Ultimately, this lack of openness to support undermines relationship well-being.

Our work revealed that the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support is partially due to loss in self-efficacy. However, other processes may also contribute to unwillingness to seek support for difficult goals. A possible alternative explanation of the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support is self-focus. When goals are perceived to be difficult and the rate of progress is low, people tend to experience anxiety and frustration (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Moberly & Watkins, 2010). Anxiety and negative affect are linked to self-focused attention, which is an inward attention to one's thoughts and feelings (Mor & Winquist, 2002; Pyszczynski, Hamilton, Greenberg, & Becker, 1991). When people experience difficult goal progress, they might be likely to narrow their attention to the self and to the goal at hand (Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 1999; Janis & Mann, 1977) at the expense of openness to external information (i.e. interpersonal support) that could potentially help them to achieve their goal. Future research should examine the potential mediating role of self-focus.

A limitation of this work is that we could not assess change in openness to support as a function of goal difficulty over time (lagged analyses) because at each time

point in Study 3, participants might have reported different goals (i.e., we did not ask participants to report on the goals listed at the earlier time, therefore the ratings of goal difficulty at a earlier time point did not correspond to ratings of openness to support at the later time point). Another limitation is that some of our measures were single-item measures which might be more subjective to measurement error. Finally, it should be noted that in Study 3 the self-efficacy measure had relatively low reliability. The low reliability of this measure might affect the statistical power of the analyses and the estimate of the true effect size of the relationship between variables.

A strength of this work is that the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support was replicated in three studies using samples from two different countries (USA and UK), and diverse measurement methods (questionnaires and videotaped interactions rated by the partners and by independent coders). Study 2 findings also showed that even for important career goals which may affect the partner, difficulty of targets' most important goal influenced openness to support. Our results are also noteworthy in that they rest on data obtained from both partners (Study 3), and in that we observed good agreement between partners and between independent coders in the test of our main hypothesis. Finally, we ensured that our findings were valid above and beyond several other potentially confounding constructs, such as goal importance, goal commitment, received partner support, promotion and prevention orientation, financial strain, depression, anxiety, and the relational nature of the goal.

Conclusions

Although romantic partners have the potential to help individuals achieve their goals, the current work showed that, paradoxically, people are less likely to be open to

their partners' support when it might be most helpful, that is, when they experience difficulties in their goal pursuit. This lack of openness, in turn, has detrimental consequences on their relation well-being because people become progressively less satisfied with their relationship.

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Footnotes

[1] Data of Study 3 draw from the same dataset used in Kumashiro et al., 2007.

[2] We asked participants to indicate their MTurk ID number. Analysis of frequency revealed that those six participants performed the survey twice. We excluded the data from their second survey.

[3] In this study, we also assessed anxiety, rumination, and procrastination about the goal. Initially, we were interested in exploring whether these variables mediated the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support. Results did not support these predictions. In the subsequent studies, we discovered that self-efficacy was the mechanism responsible for the effect of goal difficulty on openness to support.

[4] To ensure that the validity of our results was not contaminated by participants who dropped out of the study, we replicated the analyses of the link between goal difficulty and openness to support using Wave 1 and Wave 5 data separately. Results revealed that both at Time 1 and at Time 5 there was a negative association between goal difficulty and openness to support (B = -.10, $t(186)$ = -5.47, $p < .001$ and B = -.12, $t(95)$ = -3.94, $p < .001$, respectively), and between goal difficulty and perception of target's openness to support (B = -.06, $t(186)$ = -2.47, $p = .014$ and B = -.08, $t(95)$ = -1.81, $p = .073$, respectively).

[5] We also performed auxiliary analyses to explore possible moderation by participant sex, performing the key analyses including main effects and interactions for sex. These analyses revealed only 1 out of 15 significant sex effects. In the questionnaire, women reported perceiving more openness to support from their partner ($\beta = .05$, $p = .030$) than men.

[6] In these analyses, we simultaneously predicted Time 2 criteria from Time 1 predictors, Time 3 criteria from Time 2 predictors, Time 4 criteria from Time 3 predictors and Time 5 criteria from Time 4 predictors. Multilevel analyses were used to account for the nonindependence of the observations across the waves. In these analyses, "earlier" refers to the time point of the predictors and "later" refers to the time point of the criterion.