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Current Directions in Psychological Science 2010 19: 101

DOI: 10.1177/0963721410364499

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Interpersonal Influences on Self-Regulation

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Current Directions in Psychological
Science
19(2) 101-105
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DOI: 10.1177/0963721410364499
http://cdps.sagepub.com



Abstract

Since the 1960s, personality and social psychologists have taken major strides toward understanding the *intrapersonal* processes that promote successful self-regulation. The current article reviews insights into the understanding of self-regulation gained by examining the impact of *interpersonal* processes on the initiation, operation, and monitoring of goals. We review research suggesting that other people can act as triggers of goals, causing people to unconsciously initiate new goal pursuits; that interpersonal interactions can tap self-control, leaving people with depleted resources for goal pursuit; that relationship partners can support goal operation, leading to more effective goal pursuit; and that the social environment can facilitate effective monitoring of one's extant goal progress and likelihood of future goal achievement.

Keywords

self-regulation, goals, motivation, interpersonal relationships

Imagine a student, Sam, who has a goal of getting into medical school. Empirical research within social and personality psychology has uncovered many psychological processes that influence how likely it is that Sam will achieve his goal (see Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007, for review). For example, he is likelier to succeed if he is good at forgoing short-term pleasures like watching television or playing Guitar Hero for the sake of long-term rewards, and if he directs his limited self-control resources toward studying and not toward other effortful aims like eating less junk food. He is also likelier to succeed if he believes he has the necessary abilities to achieve his goal, such as good study skills, and if he responds to setbacks like low grades by viewing them as opportunities to learn rather than as reflections of inadequate ability. Whether Sam successfully achieves his goal of attending medical school, then, will be heavily determined by intrapersonal processes like those described above: delay of gratification, strength of will, self-efficacy, and self theories, respectively (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Yet Sam doesn't live in a social vacuum. Like most people, he spends much of every day with others—strangers, classmates, friends, family members, his girlfriend, and so forth. How do these others influence his success at goal pursuit? Empirical psychology has until recently been surprisingly mum on the role of social relationships in enhancing or impairing people's self-regulation. In this article, we discuss research on the role of social influences within each of the major components of goal pursuit: (a) initiation, (b) operation, and (c) monitoring. (For the purpose of this article, we define goals

as mental representations of desired end states, such as losing 20 pounds or earning a promotion.)

Interpersonal Influences on Goal Initiation

Certainly people often initiate (i.e., set and activate) goals independently, driven by internal standards and processes. However, recent research has discovered that social factors—such as the presence of others (or thoughts about others)—can also initiate goal pursuit. In laboratory experiments, simply reminding people of significant others led them to automatically activate goals they associated with those significant others (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003a).

In one illustrative study, participants reported the goals they commonly pursued with important relationship partners, including their mother; researchers categorized participants by whether or not they reported a goal to achieve academically to please their mother (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). In a laboratory session later in the term, participants completed a “priming” procedure in which they described either their mother's appearance or their path to school, and then performed an academic

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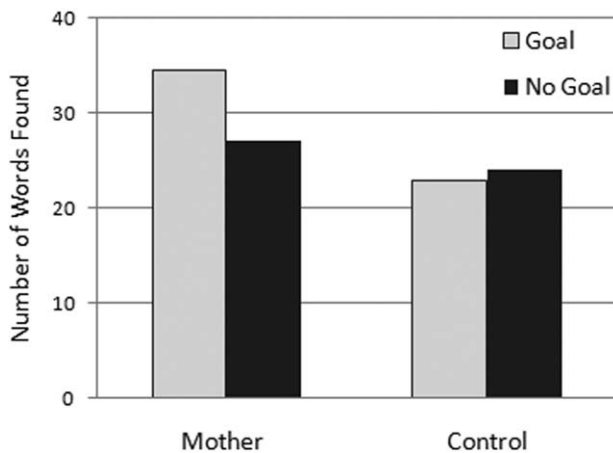


Fig 1. Performance on a verbal achievement task, in which participants generated anagram solutions. Researchers categorized participants into “goal” and “no goal” groups based on whether they had listed a goal to achieve academically to please their mother. In the lab session, participants were reminded of their mothers (or not), via a “priming” task, prior to completing the achievement task (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

achievement task (generating solutions for anagrams). Participants reminded of their mother in this way worked more successfully on the achievement task than did control participants, but only if they had reported the goal to achieve academically to please their mother (see Fig. 1), suggesting that priming participants with thoughts about their mother activated unrelated goals they associate with her.

This impact of significant others on goal activation (and, ultimately, on goal achievement) further depends on qualities of the social relationship. For example, only participants who both believed that their father cared about academics and who reported having a close relationship with their father responded to subliminal primes of “father” and “dad” by working harder on academic achievement (Shah, 2003a).

Thus, just thinking about close relationship partners can automatically activate goals that people pursue within those relationships. In addition, simply observing another person’s behavior can trigger goal-directed action (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004). As demonstrated by research on *goal contagion*, individuals automatically infer goals underlying others’ actions and subsequently activate (and ultimately pursue) those goals themselves, even in unrelated contexts. For example, participants who read a story in which the character’s actions implied he had a goal to make money (vs. a different goal) worked harder on a computer task that could earn them a cash prize.

Thus, research has illustrated that other people can elicit or trigger goals that subsequently go on to shape a person’s behavior in ways completely outside of their conscious awareness. However, the effects of others on goal initiation are not limited to these kinds of subtle or automatic processes. For instance, the examples set by role models can inspire people to deliberately set new goals (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). In addition, interpersonal contexts will not always activate goals—that is,

others will not always increase the likelihood that a specific goal is initiated. At times, others can decrease that likelihood. When people think of a relationship partner who is controlling toward them, for instance, they may try to resist that person’s influence. Indeed, in several studies, reminding participants of a controlling partner led them to behave in ways that directly opposed that person’s wishes (Chartrand, Dalton, & G. J. Fitzsimons, 2007).

Finally, scholars have thus far not developed any rich understanding of either the conditions under which interpersonal goal priming is especially like to occur or the conditions under which it will facilitate versus hinder goal pursuit. It is likely that dozens of variables—salience of the partner, chronic accessibility of the goal, interdependence of the relationship, presence of competing goals (whether conscious or nonconscious), needs for autonomy, beliefs about the partner, and so on—influence the likelihood and the nature of interpersonal-goal-priming effects.

Interpersonal Influences on Goal Operation

Although goal operation (i.e., people’s pursuit of activities directed toward goal achievement) can occur independently, it, too—like goal initiation—often occurs in social contexts. People frequently pursue important goals in the presence of others, who can influence the success or failure of goal operation. Furthermore, others’ impact on people’s goals does not end the moment they are out of sight: People’s minds are often occupied with experiences, memories, and feelings about others. How do these relationship partners—present or imagined—affect people’s ongoing goal pursuit?

To move closer to the desired end state of goal achievement, people frequently need to engage their internal self-control resources (Baumeister et al., 2007). Thus, one means by which interpersonal processes may influence goal operation is by influencing people’s self-regulatory resources. Research on *high-maintenance interactions*—those in which inefficient social coordination on an interpersonal task leads to energy exertions beyond what is needed to perform the task itself—demonstrates that effortful social interaction can deplete self-regulatory resources (Finkel et al., 2006). For example, relative to participants who had engaged in inefficient interactions, those who had engaged in efficient interactions subsequently exhibited a stronger tendency to focus on and exert themselves toward goal achievement, solving 56% more anagrams and 45% more Graduate Record Exam questions and showing less than half the decrement in handgrip persistence (a physical stamina task requiring willpower).

Dozens of additional studies have demonstrated this high-maintenance-interaction effect across diverse forms of interpersonal interaction and with diverse measures of resource depletion. For example, pursuing an unpracticed self-presentation goal (being modest to a stranger or self-promoting to a friend) depleted participants more than did pursuing a practiced self-presentation goal (being modest to a friend or self-promoting to a stranger), producing impaired math performance

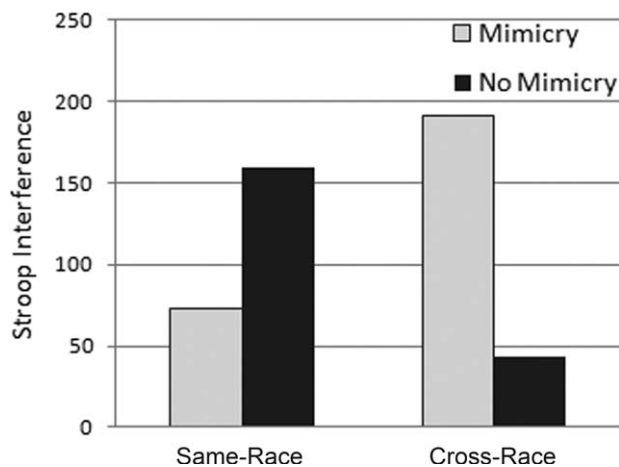


Fig 2. Mean Stroop Interference as a function of whether a same-race or cross-race interaction partner had or had not mimicked participants. Larger interference scores indicate increasingly impaired self-regulation (Dalton, Chartrand, & Finkel, in press).

(Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Discussing a racially sensitive topic with a Black (vs. White) interaction partner depleted prejudice-concerned White participants, causing greater interference on the cognitively demanding Stroop task (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). In addition, an interaction partner's subtle mimicry (a behavioral cue indicating warmth and affiliation) bolstered self-regulatory resources when people expected friendly treatment but depleted resources when they did not (Dalton, Chartrand, & Finkel, in press). For example, after a same-race interaction partner mimicked them or a cross-race interaction partner did not, participants exhibited less Stroop interference (better self-regulation) than they did after a same-race interaction partner did not mimic them or a cross-race interaction partner did (see Fig. 2).

Intriguingly, merely empathizing with another person who is exerting self-control can be sufficient to deplete self-regulatory resources (Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh, 2009). For example, individuals who had taken the perspective of a hungry waiter trying to resist eating tasty restaurant food were subsequently more depleted—more willing to spend indulgently on luxury goods—than were individuals who read about the waiter without taking his perspective.

Thus, interpersonal interactions can certainly have negative consequences for people's ability to persist in the pursuit of their goals. However, the news about the role of others in goal operation is not all bad: Relationship partners can also bolster people's self-regulatory strength. For example, after playing the "performer" role in a game of charades, participants exhibited a significant increase in handgrip persistence if they and their "guesser" were well-synchronized (Knowles, Finkel, & Williams, 2007).

Another means by which interpersonal processes influence goal operation is through *goal-relevant social support*, broadly defined as a set of processes through which another person

helps individuals engage in effective self-regulation. Social support is known to affect important health behaviors (see Uchino, 2004, for review). For example, individuals with strong social support adhere better to medical regimens than do individuals with weak social support. They also engage in more physical activity, keep more regular sleep hours, consume more fruits and vegetables, and are more likely to quit smoking (Uchino, 2004).

The beneficial effects of goal-relevant social support extend beyond health behaviors. For example, individuals achieve personal growth toward a broad range of desirable characteristics to the degree that their romantic partner inspires them by treating them as if they already possess the characteristics they aspire to possess (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Individuals whose romantic partner strongly (vs. weakly) supports and encourages their goal pursuit in domains such as academics, career, friendships, and fitness are significantly more likely to achieve those goals over time (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996). In addition, individuals who are willing to be dependent upon a romantic partner have the security and courage to pursue their goals with greater autonomy and success than do individuals who are less willing to be dependent (Feeney, 2007).

Thus, others can have both negative and positive effects on goal operation. Given that the social world has this potential to harm or help individual goal pursuit, people may benefit from recognizing the role that others play in their goal-operation efforts. Indeed, people categorize others in terms of their usefulness for operating goals, a process that allows them to readily approach goal-instrumental others and avoid goal-obstructing others (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Furthermore, to the extent that people see others in terms of their potential impact on active goals, they are likelier to succeed (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). For example, college students who responded to the experimental activation of an academic-achievement goal by reporting increased closeness to achievement-instrumental others performed better on an academic examination several weeks later. Thus, drawing closer to instrumental others is a strategy that may promote successful goal operation.

Interpersonal Influences on Goal Monitoring

When people reflect on their goal pursuits—that is, when they monitor their progress so far toward their desired end state and evaluate their likelihood of future success—how might they be influenced by their interpersonal relationships? Of the three components of self-regulation we discuss in this article (initiation, operation, and monitoring), the effect of interpersonal relationships on goal monitoring has received the least empirical attention.

Indeed, the best evidence for the effects of relationships on monitoring comes from outside of both the relationships and self-regulation research traditions. Namely, research on social-comparison processes, which reveals that people frequently compare their performance with that of others in the social environment, provides the strongest existing evidence for

interpersonal influences on self-regulation (Pinkus, Lockwood, Schimmack, & Fournier, 2008). By making social comparisons, people are essentially monitoring their goal progress by looking to their social relationships for information about their own relative success or failure. A large body of research has demonstrated that, after comparisons with more successful others (upward comparisons) in self-relevant domains, individuals often feel worse about themselves and show decreased motivation; in contrast, after comparisons with less successful others (downward comparisons) in self-relevant domains, individuals often feel better about themselves and show increased motivation (see Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). In romantic relationships, however, this tendency is diminished. For example, in recent research, participants who thought about their close others' superior performance reported greater motivation, even in self-relevant domains (Pinkus et al., 2008).

Thus, although little research has examined the role of others in the goal-monitoring process, it is clear that people look to interpersonal contexts to evaluate their goal progress. Indeed, Shah (2003b) showed a direct interpersonal influence on goal monitoring: Subtle reminders of significant others led people to modify their expectations about future goal progress. Participants reminded of significant others who believed in the participants' ability to succeed showed higher self-efficacy beliefs and, ultimately, better performance. Monitoring the other's progress—and shaping the other's self-efficacy beliefs—may be one mechanism through which partners encourage individuals to move toward their ideal selves (Rusbult et al., 2009).

Conclusions

Ten years ago, there was virtually no research investigating how interpersonal processes influence people's self-regulation. As the preceding review demonstrates, however, scholars are rapidly filling this void. They have made great strides toward clarifying how interpersonal processes influence the first two components of self-regulation: the initiation of goal-directed action and the operation of goal pursuit. Little work has directly examined how interpersonal processes influence the third component—the monitoring of goal progress—although findings from social-comparison research suggest that interpersonal processes will prove to be influential in this component as well.

Research on how others affect self-regulation has thus far examined these processes from only one direction, as though other people exist simply to influence the self. In real social relationships, of course, both people have goals to pursue. Research examining interactions among the self's and others' goals will thus contribute to our growing understanding of the social basis of self-regulation. Because goals are not pursued only in isolation but, often, in interdependence with others, research integrating interpersonal and self-regulatory perspectives provides a more accurate picture of the processes by which people pursue goals in everyday life.

Recommended Reading

- Baumeister, R.F., DeWall, C.N., Ciarocco, N.J., & Twenge, J.M. (2005). Social exclusion impairs self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*, 589–604. A key empirical piece illustrating the influence of social exclusion on self-regulatory resources.
- Baumeister, R.F., Schmeichel, B.J., & Vohs, K.D. (2007). (See References). A comprehensive review for readers wishing to expand their knowledge on the field of self-regulation.
- Finkel, E.J., Campbell, W.K., Brunell, A.B., Dalton, A.N., Chartrand, T.L., & Scarbeck, S.J. (2006). (See References). A representative set of studies illustrating how interpersonal processes can be depleting, ultimately impairing one's self-regulatory functioning.
- Fitzsimons, G.M., & Bargh, J.A. (2003). (See References). A representative set of studies about the effects of interpersonal relationships on goal initiation.
- Vohs, K.D., & Finkel, E.J. (Eds.). (2006). *Self and relationships: Connecting intrapersonal and interpersonal processes*. New York: Guilford Press. An edited volume featuring chapters on the links between relationship processes and self-regulation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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