

When People Serve as Means to Goals: Implications of a Motivational Account of Close Relationships

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Abstract

Goal pursuit is almost always conducted in concert with helpful others. People serve as instrumental means to goals, and evaluations of people are shaped by their perceived instrumentality. Assistance from another person may elicit feelings of relationship satisfaction and commitment. Assisting others in their goal pursuit is also gratifying. We present a novel goal-systemic perspective on close relationships. Our analysis suggests that satisfying relationships are achieved when partners experience *mutual perceived instrumentality*—when each partner feels instrumental to his or her partner's important goals and perceives the partner as instrumental to his or her important goals. Considering relationship partners as means to goals has important implications for relationship processes including attraction, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution.

Keywords

goals, goal pursuit, close relationships, attraction, relationship maintenance

Few would argue with the statement that nearly every goal a person pursues is facilitated, supported, or enabled by the assistance of another person. Perhaps more contentious is the assertion that whenever a person initiates contact with someone else, she or he expects the other person to be helpful toward some goal. In this sense, people can be considered means to goal pursuit. Considering people as means to goals may feel cold, calculating, and counter to common emotion-laden conceptions of close relationships. This need not be the case. Considering people as means to goals *can* lead to callous, depersonalized use of others—for example, when a person is sold into slavery or paid for sex. Yet compassionate instances abound, especially in communal relationships; when a person cares for a sick partner, embraces a sibling at a funeral, or applauds a friend's marathon training, that person is serving as a means to a partner's goals.

Satisfying relationships are likely to occur when partners experience *mutual perceived instrumentality*—when each partner is perceived as instrumental to his or her partner's important goals and perceives the partner as instrumental to his or her important goals. Our application of goal-systemic principles to instances in which

relationship partners serve as means to goals is a novel approach, but relationships researchers have long recognized the importance of close others in shaping goal pursuit. For example, the Michelangelo phenomenon concerns how relationship partners help one another strive for and achieve their goals through affirmation (Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009), and adult attachment research has examined how a partner can serve as a secure base from which to pursue goals (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

In the following sections, we review the principles of means–goal relations derived from goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), presenting examples of theory and research linking these properties to relationship processes. We then explore implications of this perspective for interpersonal processes related to attraction, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution.

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Means–Goals Relations and Close Relationships

Goals are mental representations of desirable and attainable end states that one intends to attain through action (Kruglanski, 1996). Means are the methods used to reach goals, including the actions, objects, and people that facilitate goal progress. People have multiple goals, each potentially served by a variety of means (Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2013). Goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002) details principles that explain the operation of means–goal configurations. It can be summarized according to eight principles:

1. Active goals direct attention toward instrumental means in a top-down manner (Custers, Eitam, & Bargh, 2012).
2. Available means direct attention toward associated goals in a bottom-up fashion (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003).
3. Means are evaluated according to their perceived instrumentality to active goals (Fishbach, Shah, & Kruglanski, 2004).
4. Multiple goals can be attained in the same instant using a single means attached to each of them (i.e., a multifinal means; Kruglanski et al., 2013).
5. Attaching means to multiple goals results in a dilution of the perceived instrumentality to each of the goals (Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007).
6. Multiple means may serve the same goal and can be substituted for one another (Kruglanski, Pierro, & Sheveland, 2011).
7. The presence of alternative goals or means pulls resources from a focal goal/means (Shah & Kruglanski, 2002).
8. Goals and means can be shielded from this pulling effect if alternatives are inhibited or devalued (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002).

We now apply these principles to close relationships.

Principles 1 through 3: Perceived instrumentality and person evaluations

If goal-systemic principles apply to instances in which people are means, then active goals should instigate thoughts about people who are instrumental to those goals (Principle 1). Indeed, they do (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). A person's presence also spontaneously brings to mind goals with which that person is associated (Principle 2; Shah, 2003a, 2003b). Furthermore, the affective properties of a goal are transferred to the people who serve as means to goal attainment (Principle 3): The

more instrumental a person is to a partner's goals, the more positively that partner evaluates the person (Fishbach et al., 2004). For example, when people are perceived as instrumental to one's active goals, one feels interpersonally closer and approaches those people more readily (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) highlights the importance of rewards that people reap from a relationship, including instrumental rewards. Indeed, people appreciate instrumental others more during goal pursuit than afterward (Converse & Fishbach, 2012).

Considering people as means introduces the additional possibility that people evaluate themselves according to their perceived instrumentality. Goal systems theory does not address this possibility because nonhuman means are incapable of evaluating themselves. Yet this possibility has important consequences. People are likely to feel valuable when they serve as instrumental means to others' goals. Thus, people should like serving as means to others' goals, particularly in communal relationships—relationships in which partners are responsive to each other's needs and benefits are given noncontingently (Mills & Clark, 1982). Indeed, in communal relationships, people experience decreased positive affect when they fail to help others (Williamson, Clark, Pegalis, & Behan, 1996). Attachment theory emphasizes how people both rely on others as means to their own goals (e.g., felt security) and desire to serve as means to others' goals (e.g., through caregiving; Hazan & Shaver, 2004). Research on risk regulation (Murray & Holmes, 2011) suggests that under some conditions, people strive to be instrumental to foster their partner's dependence on them. For example, feeling inferior prompts newlyweds to perform acts such as running errands for their partner (Murray, Aloni, et al., 2009).

Principles 4 through 5: When people serve multiple goals

A single person can be instrumental to many of his or her partner's goals, such as when a spouse helps her partner manage a household, stick to his fitness objective, and relax after work. When a means serves multiple goals, it is perceived as more valuable (Principle 4; Orehek, Mauro, Kruglanski, & van der Bles, 2012). However, this comes at the expense of its perceived instrumentality to each of the individual goals: As the number of goals to which a means is connected increases, the perceived connection of the means to each goal becomes diluted (Principle 5). This goals-literature finding has recently been considered in close relationships: As a marriage partner serves more goals, she or he may be perceived as more valuable overall but as less instrumental for each of

the goals that she or he serves (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Light & Fitzsimons, 2014).

Goals research reveals that when people seek multifunctional means, they are likely to have a more difficult time finding a suitable means than when they seek a means to one goal; means serving many goals are scarcer (Köpetz, Faber, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2011). Indeed, relationship partners who are instrumental to many goals are scarcer than those serving fewer goals, but searching for them may be facilitated by factors that increase the quantity of potential partners (e.g., in large cities or online-dating websites; cf. Lakey & Orehek, 2011).

Principles 6 through 8: Relationship maintenance and partner substitution

Just as multiple nonhuman means may serve the same goal (Principle 6), multiple people may serve the same goal. For example, several different people could serve as tennis partners. As the number of alternative means increases, the strength of association between the goal and any means decreases (Kruglanski et al., 2011). This finding from the goals literature is consistent with theory and research on interdependence and relationship commitment, which indicate that people are highly dependent on and committed to their relationships when alternative partners who would provide better outcomes than the current partner are unavailable (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). Thus, relationship partners may establish roles such that each person is the *exclusive* means to a particular goal. Romantic partners are commonly expected to serve as the exclusive means to sex. A friend may be the only person one can let in on a secret. By securing exclusive roles, people may increase their value in the partner's eyes and maintain a sense of relational security. It may also foster the sense that they are irreplaceable (Murray, Leder, et al., 2009). New or alternative relationships are likely to be formed when they are convenient means to goals, such as when individuals in close proximity form relationships (i.e., the propinquity effect). In addition, current relationship partners are likely to serve (new) goals because they are convenient means.

According to Principle 7, environments containing high-value substitutes should present challenges for relationship maintenance. Indeed, people report lower relationship quality when their attention is directed toward attractive alternative partners (Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994; Miller, 1997). To prevent alternative means from pulling resources from a focal means, people shield the focal means by inhibiting alternative means (Principle 8). Likewise, to reduce the temptation of attractive alternative partners, individuals can ignore or derogate them; when commitment to the current partner is high and a similarly valued alternative is present, individuals engage

in such relationship-maintaining processes (e.g., Linardatos & Lydon, 2011; Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003).

Implications

Feelings of attraction should be likely to emerge when individuals perceive each other as instrumental to active goals. Our framework can be leveraged to understand when similarity versus complementarity will be preferred (e.g., Bohns et al., 2013; Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2013). Similarity to oneself is likely to be attractive when it signals goal congruence—others seeking means for which one is willing and able to serve, and who are willing and able to serve the goals one is pursuing. Complementarity is likely to be attractive when it signals that the person is able and willing to serve as a means to goals not already satisfied by oneself (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015).

Considering people as means to goals also enables novel predictions about satisfaction maintenance. People should be comfortable being, and even desire to be, evaluated according to instrumentality for a goal they would like to serve. For example, if a husband would like to be good at fixing things, then his wife's admiration of his skills should be self-verifying (Swann, 2011); if he does not self-identify as handy, praise about these skills may not be well received. People should also enjoy being recognized for striving to attain their ideal self (Rusbult et al., 2009). Relationship satisfaction should decrease and dissolution should be more likely when partners stop being perceived as instrumental to one another's goals, are not recognized by their partner for their efforts, or serve as means to devalued goals. If, as we propose, mutual perceived instrumentality is important to satisfaction maintenance, then not only is helping our partners a good way to foster happiness, but so too is asking a partner for help.

Our analysis may help to identify relationship events that might put couples at risk of discord and dissolution. Fundamental motives, such as having a sense of social connection, persist throughout the life span. Therefore, being instrumental to such goals is one way to maintain a long-term relationship. Yet goals change over time, creating both opportunities and challenges for relationship maintenance. As goals are attained, priorities shift and new needs arise. In order for relationships to thrive, partners must continue to be perceived as instrumental to current goals (for a similar argument regarding attraction, see Finkel & Eastwick, 2015). Thus, an ability to be flexibly instrumental is likely to be beneficial. Partners may also engage in new activities and pursue new goals together to ensure ongoing instrumentality. Engaging in novel arousing activities increases relationship quality (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000),

perhaps, in part, because the partner is serving as a means to a new goal, a form of self-expansion.

One person cannot serve all goals held by a partner. Thus, constructing a social network of individuals who combine to serve one's needs is ideal (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2015). If one has friends with whom to relax and discuss preferred topics, then one's spouse need not serve as a means to those goals. Because finding a multifinal person who serves one's unique set of goals can be difficult, and comes with the consequence of diluted instrumentality to each of those goals, building a network of people who each facilitate a few of one's goals should benefit each of those relationships.

Considering people as means may also shed light on roots of infidelity and on the kinds of alternative partners who are pursued. Infidelity occurs when one uses a person other than one's partner to serve as an alternative means to a goal (e.g., sex, intimacy). Infidelity should occur when a partner is not serving as an instrumental means to a person's active goal(s). In such cases, people should value alternatives who serve as means to that unfulfilled goal. Thus, appealing alternatives likely differ from the current partner in their domains of instrumentality. Some goals could be fulfilled by nonromantic partners, but unfulfilled sexual or affection goals may make alternative romantic partners attractive.

Finally, our perspective guides predictions about how people cope with relationship loss (e.g., due to relationship dissolution or death). Relationship loss entails losing a means to important goals and the value derived from being instrumental to another's goals. Individuals with social networks that cannot substitute for the lost partner as a means to particular goals, and individuals who are not instrumental to many other network members' goals, should find relationship loss particularly devastating. Effective support provision during times of loss, then, could include serving as means to goals the former partner served and providing opportunities for the person suffering the loss to serve as a means to goals that he or she previously served for the partner.

Many of these implications have not been directly tested. Future research should aim to understand whether each of the goal-systems principles apply to people as means and explore implications for the quality and longevity of close relationships. Principles 4 through 5, as applied to cases in which a person serves as a means to multiple goals, are the least supported by evidence but offer many compelling questions that we hope will inspire future research.

As a final note, we do not assume that these processes necessarily occur consciously or intentionally. Indeed, much of the research cited has shown that these processes can occur nonconsciously and unintentionally. Important questions for future research concern whether

people are aware of their own or their partners' role as means and how such awareness would affect the consequences of mutual perceived instrumentality (e.g., objectification; visible versus invisible support; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000).

Recommended Reading

- Finkel, E. J., Hui, C. M., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2014). (See References). An article describing changing expectations in marriage over time.
- Fitzsimons, G. M., Finkel, E. J., & vanDellen, M. (2015). (See References). Presents a theory describing the way people pursue goals together and for one another.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Shah, J. Y., Fishbach, A., Friedman, R., Chun, W. Y., & Sleeth-Keppler, D. (2002). (See References). Presents a theory describing how people pursue their multiple goals.
- Lakey, B., & Orehek, E. (2011). (See References). Presents a theory explaining social support and relationship processes.
- Light, A. E., & Fitzsimons, G. M. (2014). (See References). An article commenting on the Finkel, Hui, Carswell, and Larson (2014) marriage article, with commentary on the consequences of having a marriage partner who serves more versus fewer goals.

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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