The Role of Goal Congruence in Relationship Quality and Subjective Well-Being

by

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Abstract

The goal of this dissertation was to examine how people pursue their personal goals in the context of an intimate relationship. Two studies were conducted; a daily diary study of dating partners’ joint activities and a longitudinal study of newly dating couples. In the daily diary study, people reported on their daily joint activities with their dating partners regarding whether their goals were met and how they were feeling during the given activity. The results showed that when people’s goals were met in an activity, their partners were able to accurately perceive that their goals were being met. However, when their goals were not met in the activity, their partners’ accuracy regarding their goals was only at chance levels. The partners’ overall levels of goal congruence did not predict the proportion of goal-congruent activities the partners participated in. However, the partners’ level of goal congruence predicted increases in life satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship satisfaction, as well as decreases in negative affect over time. In the longitudinal study, newly dating couples filled out measures of their goals, well-being, and relationship quality during their initial session. Three months later, the couples filled out measures of these same constructs again and answered questions about the goals that they reported pursuing during their initial session. Results showed that concurrently, the partners’ levels of goal congruence were associated with greater ability to make goal progress
and higher relationship satisfaction, both of which, in turn, were associated with higher subjective well-being. Longitudinally, initial levels of goal congruence did not predict changes in goal progress and relationship quality over time. However, analysis of the individual goals indicated that people adjusted their goal pursuits based on the level of goal conflict between their own goals and their partners’ goals, such that people were more likely to stop pursuing or devalue goals that conflicted with their partners’ goals over time. Furthermore, the tendency to adjust goals over time was associated with increasing relationship commitment. The results of these studies show that conflict between relationship partners’ goals has important consequences for their relationship, goal progress, and personal well-being.
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Chapter 1
General Introduction

1 General Introduction

Most people live their lives and make their decisions with the hope that the things they do will lead to greater happiness. Ultimately, most people want to be happy and live a life that is close to their ideal. Recently, a number of researchers have begun to conduct studies that can provide a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to people’s happiness (Diener & Fujita, 1995; King, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Hoon, 2007) and have used scientific evidence to make suggestions for public policy decisions in order to enhance national levels of well-being (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009b). Given that people place such high importance on being happy, it is indeed important to understand how happiness can be increased.

Some researchers have suggested that being able to pursue personal goals is very important for high well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1999; King, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Sheldon, 2008). Other researchers have argued that good quality social relationships are vital for high levels of well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gere & MacDonald, 2010; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004). The importance of these two factors – goal pursuit and social relationships – for well-being is well-established, but they have traditionally been studied in separate lines of research. However, recent studies have shown that these factors influence one another (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010), perhaps in complex ways. Studying the level of congruence between the goals of relationship partners is one avenue through which we can gain a greater understanding of how goal pursuit influences relationships and vice versa. In my dissertation, I examined how the level of congruence between the goals of relationship partners influences the way they pursue their goals, and the quality of their relationships. If the level of congruence between relationship partners’ goals influences the partners’ ability to make goal progress and the quality of their relationships, then goal congruence has important implications for the well-being of the partners. By learning more about the influence of goal congruence and about what couples do to reduce goal conflict, it may be possible to promote higher levels of well-being.
In this chapter of my dissertation I begin with a discussion of the concept of well-being, then explain why well-being has been strongly linked to the pursuit of personal goals, and summarize the literature on goal pursuit in the context of close relationships. Finally, I introduce the theoretical framework on which I based my dissertation studies to examine the interplay between goal pursuit and intimate relationships and their influence on well-being, and provide an overview of the two studies I conducted.

1.1 What is Well-Being?

Well-being, or happiness, has long been a topic of discussion and debate among philosophers, at least as far back as Aristotle and Plato (Haybron, 2008). Given that the ancient question of what well-being is has not been settled even in philosophy to date, it is not surprising that the different conceptualizations of well-being that originate in philosophy have also transferred into modern research on well-being in psychology (Haybron, 2008). In existing research, definitions of well-being in psychology can be classified into two broad categories: objective definitions and subjective definitions (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009a).

Objective definitions of well-being propose that there are key features in people’s lives that must exist in order for an individual to have high well-being (Diener et al., 2009a). If a given individual has all of the identified features in their lives, he or she is said to have a high level of well-being. In contrast, individuals who lack one or more of the identified key features are argued to have lower levels of well-being. For example, having good quality close relationships has been argued to be a key feature in people’s well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Heller et al., 2004). Thus, according to an objective definition of well-being, those who have such close relationships have higher well-being than those who do not have them. It is important to note that these objective definitions do not consider the subjective experiences and preferences of the individuals in question (Diener et al., 2009a). The definitions imply that if a person has all of the identified features, then that person has high well-being, regardless of that person’s preferences or subjective feelings about their own life. The life of the individual is evaluated based on objective, predetermined criteria, irrespective of the individual’s own views about his or her life.

In contrast, subjective definitions of well-being propose that well-being is dependent on the subjective evaluations of the individual whose life is being judged (Diener et al., 2009a). These definitions focus on people’s interpretations of their own lives instead of objective criteria. It is
important to note that objective criteria are still important in the sense that these criteria are important to many people who base their subjective judgments in part on these criteria (Diener et al., 2009a). For example, for most people close relationships are very important and will strongly influence their evaluations of their lives. However, subjective definitions leave room for individual differences, allowing people to decide which aspects of their lives they value and whether they evaluate those aspects positively. For example, people may differ in the degree to which they value close relationships in their lives, and as such, the well-being of individuals who do not value close relationships highly may be relatively less influenced by the state of their close relationships in comparison to those who value close relationships highly.

In my dissertation, I used a subjective definition of well-being. In current subjective approaches to well-being in psychology, well-being is often referred to as subjective well-being and is proposed to have three related but distinct components (Diener, 1984). The first two components are positive affect and negative affect, which encompass people’s emotional experiences. The third component is life satisfaction, which encompasses people’s cognitive evaluations of their own lives. These components of subjective well-being have also been conceptualized as indicators of subjective well-being, rather than components per se (Busseri & Sadava, 2011).

1.1.1 Components of Well-Being

The affective components of subjective well-being – positive affect and negative affect – may seem to be polar opposites, but can be measured independently from one another, although they are negatively correlated (Diener, 1984; Diener, Smith, & Fujita, 1995; Gere & Schimmack, 2011; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996; Russell, 1980; Scollon, Diener, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Affective experiences are important because they serve an adaptive function in people’s lives (Lazarus, 1991). Emotions have considerable survival value because they signal to people whether things are going well in their environment or not (Lazarus, 1991). Generally, positive emotions are experienced when things are going well in people’s lives and negative emotions are experienced when things are not going well (Lazarus, 1991). Thus, affective experiences have direct relevance for overall levels of subjective well-being (Lazarus, 1991). People who experience higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect tend to have higher levels of subjective well-being than people who experience less positive and more negative affect (Diener, 1984).
High subjective well-being, however, is not just about experiencing positive emotions and avoiding the experience of negative emotions. It is also important for people to evaluate their lives as satisfying and in line with their preferences (Diener et al., 2009a). People’s evaluative judgments of their lives are captured by the cognitive component of subjective well-being, which is life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). People want to experience positive emotions because their lives are in line with their preferences and they also want to interpret their lives as meeting their aspirations and desires (Diener et al., 2009a). In other words, people want to feel good for the right reasons (i.e., because their lives are in line with their preferences). Thus, life satisfaction adds an important dimension to subjective well-being that cannot be captured just by measuring people’s affective experiences.

When measuring subjective well-being, researchers commonly measure all three components and use them to create an overall score (Diener, 1984). Self-report measures of affect and life satisfaction have shown sufficient reliability and validity (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009c). For example, self-report measures of well-being correspond to objective indicators of well-being (e.g., unemployment, disability) and are correlated with informant ratings of well-being (Diener et al., 2009c). Thus, it is possible to use an individual’s report of his or her subjective well-being to study how well-being might change over time or how different factors may influence a person’s well-being. In my dissertation I focused on how the interplay between goal pursuit and intimate relationships is related to subjective well-being. In the next section, I explain how goal pursuit and well-being are related to one another.

1.2 Goal Pursuit and Well-Being

Goal pursuit has been deemed to be very important for high levels of subjective well-being. Many researchers argue that having important personal goals and being able to make progress toward them is essential for high well-being (Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1999; King, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). According to appraisal theories of emotions, people’s goals are directly tied to emotional experiences (Lazarus, 1991). Furthermore, the architecture of sustainable happiness model suggests that pursuing valued goals is key to achieving and maintaining high levels of subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Appraisal theories of emotions posit that emotional experiences are a result of cognitive appraisal processes (Lazarus, 1991). In other words, people continuously and automatically
evaluate their surrounding environments, and their evaluations give rise to their emotional experiences. Importantly, it is proposed people evaluate their environments in relation to their goals. When the environment is not relevant to the individual’s current goals or there is no goal being actively pursued, the individual does not experience positive or negative emotions. But when the environment is relevant to an actively pursued goal, it is evaluated through the appraisal process. For example, if Peter is trying to quench his thirst, his surroundings are evaluated in relation to his ability to obtain something to drink. The valence of the emotions experienced depends on whether the environment is appraised as beneficial for goal progress or as thwarting goal progress. If the surrounding environment is beneficial for goal progress, positive emotions are experienced. The particular positive emotion experienced depends on the nature of the appraisal. For example, when an individual expects to encounter an obstacle to goal pursuit that does not materialize, relief is experienced (e.g., Peter expects to see a long lineup at the drink bar, but when he arrives there is nobody in line). When an individual gains something he or she desires, the experienced emotion is joy (e.g., Peter finally receives his drink).

On the other hand, if the surrounding environment thwarts an individual’s progress toward goals, negative emotions are experienced. Once again, the particular emotion experienced depends on the specific situational circumstances. For example, when progress toward a goal is thwarted as a result of the intentional actions of another person, the resulting emotion is anger (e.g., the server tells Peter that she has decided to close up for the day and won’t give Peter a drink before closing). When future harm is expected, the experienced emotion is anxiety or fear (e.g., Peter expects that by the time he gets to the drink bar it may already be closed for the day). In short, appraisal theories of emotions propose that people’s emotional experiences are dependent on their goals and their experiences of their surroundings as beneficial or harmful for their pursuit of those goals.

Therefore, the main tenets of appraisal theories of emotions suggest that the affective components of subjective well-being – positive and negative affect – are directly linked to the goals people pursue (Lazarus, 1991). Numerous studies provide strong support for the links between goal progress and affective experiences. Consistent with appraisal theories, researchers have found that people who are able to make more progress toward their goals report experiencing more positive and fewer negative emotions than those who make less progress (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1999; Sheldon & Hoon, 2007). Furthermore, when people feel that
their goal pursuit efforts are being thwarted, they experience increases in negative emotions and decreases in positive emotions (Diener, 1984; Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1999).

In addition to appraisal theories of emotions, other well-being theorists have also argued that goal pursuit is important for subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; King, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Sheldon, 2008). In fact, some researchers have argued that the links between goal pursuit and well-being are so strong that they should become targets for interventions (King, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). For example, King (2008) suggested that if people want to increase their levels of well-being, the best way to do it is through adopting and pursuing personally meaningful, attainable goals. This suggestion is consistent with the main arguments of a recent model of well-being, which has been called the architecture of sustainable happiness model (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This model proposes that three different factors contribute to well-being: a set point of well-being (e.g., genes, personality traits), circumstances (e.g., demographics, life events), and intentional activities (e.g., cognitive activities, goal pursuit). In their discussion of the model, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that the category of intentional activities should be the prime target for intervention in order to achieve long-term, sustainable increases in well-being. It is important to note that goal pursuit is one of the main activities that make up this category of intentional activities.

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) argue that previous efforts to increase well-being have often failed because people adapt to life circumstances and most changes in their lives. For example, Anna may believe that plastic surgery will make her prettier and happier and pays a lot of money to have the procedure done. Although it is likely that after the surgery Anna will feel happier, over time, she will get used to her new appearance and the effects of the surgery will wear off. As she gets used to her new looks, her level of well-being will return to her baseline level, essentially where it was before the surgery. This adaptation occurs because after a change, such as Anna’s surgery, the person’s circumstances remain constant and adaptation to constant circumstances eventually ensues (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) further propose that goal pursuit can contribute to sustainable increases in well-being because activities associated with goal pursuit are less susceptible to adaptation. First, when people pursue important goals, the activities associated with goal pursuit can often be meaningful and contribute to both affective well-being and life satisfaction. Second,
activities associated with the pursuit of a goal are often varied rather than repetitive and constant. The same goal can often be pursued in multiple ways. Also, as people make progress toward a goal, the steps they need to take to make further progress require enacting different behaviours. If they run into obstacles, they also often need to change their approach to be able to resolve the difficulty. For example, if John wants to run a marathon, he may start with a short jog in his neighbourhood, but as his fitness level increases, he will need to change his route continuously to produce further goal progress, resulting in longer runs that reach other neighbourhoods, providing variety. By definition, people can only adapt to things that do not change.

However, if people pursue a goal by repeating the same action over and over again without changing anything, it is very likely that adaptation will occur. For example, if John decides to achieve his goal of running a marathon by running laps around the track at the local school and he only increases the number of laps he runs as his fitness levels increase, the possibility of the action becoming repetitive increases, thereby increasing the degree of adaptation. Thus, given that the pursuit of many goals occurs through engaging in varied activities, this strategy may present the most potential to increase well-being in a way that can be maintained over time. People have at least some degree of control over their daily activities, making it possible for them to make changes that can improve their well-being. Initial studies provide support for the idea that goal pursuit and variety in activities can promote higher levels of well-being (Sheldon, 2008; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

1.3 Goal Pursuit in the Context of Close Relationships

Although goal pursuit has been recognized as important for well-being, there are some weaknesses in the existing literature that are important to address. The main limitation is that the vast majority of existing studies have taken an intraindividual perspective, considering how people pursue their goals and how various factors influence goal progress from the perspective of the individual only. Although it is important to understand the process of goal pursuit from an intraindividual perspective, it is also important to recognize that goals are pursued in a social context. People often pursue their goals while they are in the company of others, and those involved in intimate relationships pursue goals within the constraints of their existing relationships. Close relationship partners influence various aspects of goal pursuit (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010) and at the same time, people’s goals also influence their relationships (Gere &
Schimmack, in press). Close others also have their own personal goals that they want to pursue, and the interplay – degree of congruence or conflict – between the goals of the partners may influence both the quality of the relationship and the partners’ goal pursuits. Existing studies rarely consider the influence of close relationships on goal pursuit, the influence of goals on relationships, and the interplay between the goals of the partners. Given that both goal pursuit (e.g., Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1999; King, 2008) and close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 2005; Heller et al., 2004) are important sources of well-being, understanding the interplay between them is likely to contribute to a greater understanding of how well-being can be enhanced and maintained. The handful of studies that have examined both goals and relationships are reviewed next.

### 1.3.1 Relationship Influences on Goal Pursuit

Recent studies have clearly shown that close others influence many aspects of goal pursuit (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). For example, the presence of others influences whether or not we begin to pursue a given goal (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Some individuals may inhibit the pursuit of a given goal, whereas the presence of others may prime and unconsciously lead to the pursuit of the same goal (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Research also shows that others can influence the effectiveness with which goal pursuit occurs, thus influencing the amount of progress people can make. For instance, when an individual has difficulty coordinating his or her actions with the actions of another person, the inefficient interaction can deplete their self-regulatory capacity that would be needed for successful goal pursuit (Finkel et al., 2006). On the positive side, relationship partners can also enhance goal progress by being supportive of one’s goal pursuits, which allows one to make greater goal progress (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010; Rafaeli, Cranford, Green, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008).

Other people, especially close others, also influence the goal pursuit process much earlier than the execution phase. For example, some research shows that others influence how we appraise our goals (Shah, 2003). More specifically, if others with whom we have close relationships (e.g., parents, friends, romantic partners) believe that a goal that we are pursuing is not attainable for us, their evaluation of the goal’s attainability influences our own evaluations of how attainable we believe the goal to be. For example, if Mary wants to get into medical school but her parents
do not think that this is a realistic goal for her, Mary may also start to feel that medical school is out of her reach. This has important implications for goal pursuit because evaluations of attainability influence how much effort people invest in pursuing a goal, thereby influencing the likelihood of goal progress and attainment (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Shah, 2003). In other words, as Mary also starts to feel that medical school is out of her reach, she may dedicate less effort to getting high grades or may even decide that medical school is not for her. Thus, although relatively few researchers have examined relational influences on goal pursuit so far, it seems clear that people’s close relationships have considerable influence on many – if not all – stages of goal pursuit.

1.3.2 Influences of Goals on Relationships

The relation between goals and relationships is not unidirectional. It is not just that relationships influence the pursuit of goals, but people’s goals also influence their relationships. Some experimental research suggests that people evaluate the closeness of their relationships in part based on the relationship partner’s instrumentality to their goals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). When people feel that a given person is instrumental to the goal that they are currently pursuing, they evaluate that person as closer to them and prefer to spend more time with that person compared to those who are not instrumental to the given goal (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). For example, if John finds that Mary is very supportive of his goal to run a marathon and they often go for a run together, he may feel very close to her and want to spend more time with her. Furthermore, these feelings of closeness shift based on the particular goal the individual is pursuing and the instrumentality of the partner for the goals being pursued (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). For example, if John is focused on studying for his upcoming exam, Mary’s insistence to go for a run together may be seen as a distraction, which may lead him to feel less close to her when he is pursuing his goal to study. These findings suggest that the way people evaluate others in part depends on the goals they have and pursue.

The goals individuals pursue also have implications for the quality of their relationships. For example, research suggests that pursuing approach goals may benefit relationships, whereas pursuing avoidance goals may harm relationships (Gable, 2006; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett & Gordon, 2008; Impett et al., 2010). Approach goals are goals that are focused on
obtaining rewards, such as increasing intimacy in a relationship, whereas avoidance goals are focused on avoiding negative outcomes, such as avoiding arguments with the partner (Gable, 2006). Research on the pursuit of these two types of goals has indicated that approach goals are associated with positive outcomes, such as experiencing more positive social events, higher relationship satisfaction, and more frequent positive emotions (Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2010). In contrast, the pursuit of avoidance goals has been consistently associated with negative outcomes, such as higher loneliness, lower relationship satisfaction, greater anxiety and other negative emotions, and greater relationship conflict (Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2010). In sum, the studies conducted to date show that the goals people pursue also influence their relationships and social outcomes.

1.3.3 Examining Partner Effects

Although recent work has begun to examine effects of goals on relationships and vice versa, these studies often only consider the experiences of only one of the partners (e.g., the relationship satisfaction and goals of one partner). Effects on the partners, such as their goals and relationship satisfaction, are usually ignored. People’s goals may have consequences not only for themselves, but also for their relationship partners. The few existing studies that have considered the effects of one partner’s goals on the other partner reveal that goals have implications for both partners in the relationship (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Canevello & Crocker, 2011; Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2010). For example, having approach goals is not only beneficial for the self, but also for the relationship partner, who also experiences more positive emotions and higher relationship satisfaction as a result of the other’s approach goals (Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2010). Similarly, one partner’s avoidance goals damage not only his or her own satisfaction with the relationship, but also the partner’s relationship satisfaction (Impett et al., 2005; Impett et al., 2010).

Other work shows the importance of compassionate and self-image goals for both the self and the partner. Compassionate goals are goals that focus on caring for the partner and ensuring the well-being of the partner (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Canevello & Crocker, 2011). For example, if Peter helps Anna with school work in order to help her achieve a higher grade in the course, this would be a compassionate goal, as the focus is on the well-being and benefit of his partner. In contrast, self-image goals put the focus on the self and have the aim of good outcomes
for the self (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Canevello & Crocker, 2011). For example, if Peter helps Anna with school work so that she would see him as a competent person, this would be a self-image goal because the focus is on creating a positive impression of himself to his partner. Research shows that compassionate goals lead to higher levels of responsiveness to the needs of the partner, who in turn perceives the higher level of responsiveness and responds with an increase in their own compassionate goals (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). In contrast, self-image goals lead to lower responsiveness to the partner’s needs, who then responds with decreases in compassionate and increases in self-image goals (Canevello & Crocker, 2010).

Considering the influence of one partner’s goals on both partners is an important step in increasing understanding of the complex dynamics between relationship partners. A further layer of complexity is added by the fact that both partners in a relationship have their own goals. Thus, there is likely to be a dynamic interplay between the goals of the partners that needs to be taken into account. In addition to the simple effects of one partner’s goals on the other partner and vice versa, the goals of the partners also interact as they combine to form unique combinations. Partners’ goals are congruent to varying levels, and the level of congruence between their goals will likely influence both their ability to make goal progress and the quality of their relationship, thereby also influencing their well-being. In order to analyze the interplay between the goals of two individuals, I relied on interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008) in my dissertation as my theoretical framework.

### 1.3.4 Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory is a theoretical framework that provides a detailed analysis of situations in which two interdependent people (e.g., relationship partners) make decisions based on their own and the other person’s interests (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). For example, John and Mary are a couple trying to decide how to spend their weekend together after a stressful week at work based on both their preferences. According to interdependence theory, one of the most important features of situations is the degree of covariation between the interests of the partners (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). When the interests of the partners are perfectly aligned, the situation is simple, as there are no problems that need to be resolved. For example, if both John and Mary want to unwind together by doing something adventurous, their interests are perfectly aligned. In these types of scenarios, the
partners have the same goals; thus they can move on to coordinating their actions and planning how to meet their corresponding interests. For example, John and Mary would now have to decide where they want to spend the weekend and what adventurous activity they want to do together. These types of situations usually do not involve the need to make difficult decisions and compromises. Given that these scenarios do not lead to conflict between the partners, interdependence theory does not dedicate much consideration to these situations.

On the other end of the continuum are situations in which the interests of the partners are negatively related. These types of situations are competitive zero-sum scenarios, where what is good for one partner is bad for the other partner and vice versa. For example, if John wants to unwind by doing something adventurous and Mary wants to unwind by staying home and relaxing, then what would benefit one partner is the opposite of what would benefit the other partner. In such a situation, one partner may decide to give in to the other partner, or the partners may decide to do something different that does not really meet the needs of either one of them, or they may decide to unwind in their own ways and not spend the weekend together (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Although situations where the interests of the partners are negatively related exist, it is relatively unlikely that these types of situations are common in intimate relationships. This is because relationship partners tend to be similar to each other on many dimensions, such as their attitudes and values (Gaunt, 2006; Luo, 2009) and also because partners care about each other’s well-being, which makes it unlikely that what’s good for one partner is bad for the other (Impett & Gordon, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010; Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004).

Based on relationship partners’ concern for each other (Impett & Gordon, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010), when the partners’ goals are not perfectly aligned, they are likely to experience situations where their interests are not negatively related, but fall somewhere in between being perfectly aligned and negatively aligned. Interdependence theory refers to situations where the goals of the partners are not perfectly aligned as diagnostic situations (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). In these situations, the partners encounter having to decide how to respond and what to do. The initial reactions of people in these situations – their gut reactions – are to act based on their own self-interests and do what they want, irrespective of the partner’s interests (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). For example, John’s gut reaction would be to go out and do something adventurous despite Mary’s preference to stay at home to relax.
However, given that in these situations the self-interested course of action is not in line with the needs of the partner, there is a potential for people to reveal their true motives regarding the relationship, whether that would be to benefit the partner or to benefit the self (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). If John decides to pursue his self-interest and go on an adventurous outing without considering Mary’s needs, he reveals that he may be more interested in benefiting himself instead of Mary and their relationship. When such motives are revealed it can be quite concerning because it may signal a partner’s lack of long-term commitment to the relationship and may undermine trust in the partner (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Verette, 1991; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Given that trust in the partner is essential for a relationship to function properly (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Murray et al., 2009), these types of situations have the potential to undermine a relationship when they reveal that the partner is more interested in meeting their own needs (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008).

In spite of the urge to react based on self-interest in goal conflict situations, people often do not act in accordance with their gut reactions and take their partner’s needs into account (Impett & Gordon, 2008; Rusbult & Verette, 1991; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Interdependence theory calls the movement from a gut-level reaction to a more relationship-oriented reaction transformation of motivation (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008). This occurs when people move beyond the immediate effects of the situation on their self-interests and consider the long-term consequences of their actions for themselves, their partner, and the relationship. When they consider the possibilities, their resulting action may differ from their original gut-level reaction, but this may not always be the case. For example, John may still decide to go for an adventurous outing with his friends and leave Mary at home despite Mary’s strong disapproval because he believes that Mary should get over her anger. In other cases, people decide that it is for their own long-term benefit to maintain their relationship and make their partner happy, and so they decide to do what’s best for the relationship or discuss the issue with their partner and try to reach a solution that is acceptable to both partners. For example, John may end up staying at home with Mary or they may agree to spend Saturday at home relaxing and go out to do something on Sunday.
The outcome of the transformation process is influenced by many important factors (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). What partners choose to do depends in part on their interaction history (e.g., patterns of transformations by the partners in past interactions, their most recent interaction), the importance of the issue at hand (e.g., a minor issue, such as who is picking up milk on the way home, or a major issue, such as whether to take a promotion that involves a move to another city), the availability of information (e.g., knowledge of the partner’s preferences, knowledge of the potential outcomes), the personalities of the partners (e.g., communally oriented partners may be more concerned about their partner’s outcomes), and other situational influences (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Thus, it is not the case that some individuals always respond with pro-relationship responses. Furthermore, sometimes giving up one’s own preferences may not be the best choice to attain the best long-term outcome. People’s responses may vary considerably from situation to situation, although people can also establish typical ways of responding to certain types of situations that may even become habitual (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For example, if Anna often asks Peter to pick up something from the grocery store on his way home, he may not give much thought to his actions and just stop by the store when needed.

Although interdependence theory provides a detailed analysis of situations based on the goals of interaction partners, research that has considered the interplay between the goals of partners is scarce. Emerging research on goal congruence in romantic relationships has recently addressed the effects of congruent and incongruent goals on the emotional experiences of the partners, the quality of their relationship, and their subjective well-being (Gere, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2011; Gere & Schimmack, in press). The findings of these studies are discussed next.

1.3.5 Goal Congruence

Based on interdependence theory, Gere and her colleagues (Gere et al., 2011; Gere & Schimmack, in press) have proposed that the level of congruence between the goals of relationship partners is important for the well-being of the partners because it may influence the partner’s ability to make goal progress and the quality of their relationship. They argue that higher levels of goal congruence lead to more positive emotional experiences on a day-to-day basis, and that these experiences translate into higher levels of relationship quality and subjective well-being.
On a day-to-day basis, relationship partners interact with one another multiple times given their high levels of interdependence. The more committed and long-term a relationship is, the more interdependence there is between the partners, and the more frequently they face situations where they have to coordinate their goal pursuits (Gere et al., 2011; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For example, married partners who live together are much more interdependent than dating partners who may see each other primarily during their leisure time. The higher degree of interdependence of married couples leads to more interactions, and thus to potentially higher frequency of situations where their goals are not perfectly aligned. Given that no two people have identical goals, it is inevitable that at times the goals of partners will be incongruent (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Two goals are defined as congruent when both partners can make progress toward their own goals simultaneously while they are spending time together (Gere et al., 2011). For example, if Anna has the goal of losing weight and Peter has the goal of increasing his physical fitness level, their goals are congruent because they can both make progress toward their goal by going to the gym to work out together. In contrast, two goals are incongruent when the partners cannot both make progress toward their goals while spending time together (Gere et al., 2011). For example, Mary’s goal of staying at home and watching her favourite TV show is incongruent with John’s goal of going to a friend’s party that same night because these two goals cannot be pursued simultaneously while the partners are spending time together.

In two studies, Gere and colleagues (2011) tested the affective consequences of activities in which relationship partners’ goals are congruent and activities in which their goals are incongruent. In an experience sampling study with married couples, they found that goal-congruent activities were associated with the highest feelings of closeness to one’s partner. These effects were observed over and above the benefits of spending time with the partner and meeting one’s own goals. Furthermore, goal-congruent activities were also associated with the highest levels of affective well-being, which refers to a combination of high positive affect and low negative affect. Similarly to the findings with feelings of closeness, the effects on affective well-being were found above and beyond the effects of being together with the partner and the effects of being able to make progress toward one’s own goals. When partners were taking part in an activity in which their goals were not congruent (i.e., activities that met either only the respondent’s own goals or only the responder’s partner’s goals), their feelings of closeness to
their partner did not increase (feelings of closeness were unchanged from one’s baseline feelings of closeness). However, they did experience significant decreases in their affective well-being in these goal-incongruent situations, indicating that they experienced more negative affect and less positive affect than they usually do.

In their second study, Gere et al. (2011) examined retrospective recalls of goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities by dating partners. Each partner was instructed to recall a goal-congruent activity and two goal-incongruent activities (one activity that met only their own goals and one activity that met only their partner’s goals) and rated each of the activities on a number of dimensions, including how much they enjoyed the activity with their partner. Consistent with the findings of the experience-sampling study with married couples, the results indicated that partners enjoyed those activities the most that met both partners’ goals simultaneously. Thus, the results of these two studies indicate that goal-congruent activities are associated with higher momentary affective well-being and feelings of closeness to one’s partner. Participation in these types of activities more frequently may benefit both the relationship and the well-being of the partners.

Momentary experiences of emotions are important because they contribute to overall levels of well-being (Gere & Schimmack, 2011). Thus, frequent participation in goal-congruent activities may lead to increases in subjective well-being as they contribute to experiences of higher positive and lower negative affect (Gere et al., 2011). One important factor that may allow partners to take part in goal-congruent activities more frequently and reduce the necessity to take part in goal-incongruent activities is the overall level of congruence between the goals of the relationship partners. When the goals of the partners are highly congruent, they are less likely to find themselves in situations of goal conflict and may therefore participate in goal-congruent activities more frequently (Gere & Schimmack, in press). Thus, the overall level of congruence between the goals of relationship partners should be associated with higher levels of subjective well-being.

Consistent with this idea, Gere and Schimmack (in press) found that partners’ overall levels of goal congruence were associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. They found that the influence of goal congruence on well-being was mediated through higher relationship quality. Goal congruence can enhance the quality of the relationship because it allows partners to
participate in goal-congruent activities more frequently, which increase their affective well-being and feelings of closeness to one another (Gere et al., 2011). Furthermore, goal congruence also has the potential to reduce the amount of conflict in the relationship (Gere & Schimmack, in press). It is well-known that conflict can be very damaging to a relationship, especially if it is recurrent (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). When the partners’ important, long-term goals are incongruent, they would either have to give up the pursuit of the incongruent goal (or at least one of them would), or repeated attempts to pursue the incongruent goals could introduce ongoing conflict between the partners (Gere & Schimmack, in press). Such conflict, especially with regards to goals that are central to a person’s identity and are pursued over long periods of time, could be very damaging to a relationship (Gere & Schimmack, in press). Thus, goal congruence has the potential to both enhance the positives as well as reduce the negatives in a relationship.

Furthermore, Gere and Schimmack (in press) also found that after accounting for the mediated link through relationship quality, there remained a direct link between goal congruence and well-being. They argued that this is likely because goal congruence is also associated with being able to make more progress toward one’s own goals. In other words, people whose goals are more congruent with their partner’s goals are able to engage in activities that facilitate their goals more frequently, enabling greater goal progress. Higher levels of goal progress, in turn, should be associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, consistent with prior research (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1989; King, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Thus, their study suggests that goal congruence may be associated with higher subjective well-being through higher quality relationships and greater goal progress. However, it is important to point out that they did not measure goal progress directly, so the latter association remains untested.

1.4 Overview of Dissertation Studies

Given that research on goal congruence has emerged relatively recently, the aim of the current work was to increase understanding of how goal congruence functions in relationships over time and how people attempt to adjust to goal incongruence in their relationships. I conducted two studies on goal congruence in romantic relationships. The focus of the first study – a daily diary study – was to explore goal congruence in greater depth at the level of everyday activities. The focus of the second study – a longitudinal study – was to investigate goal congruence at the
broader, relationship level. The goals and predictions of these studies are explained in more detail below.

1.4.1 Daily Goal Pursuit: A Daily Diary Study

The aim of the daily diary study was to examine the daily activities of dating couples from the perspectives of both partners. In order to obtain dyadic data, I made an effort to ensure that both members of each couple reported on the same activity. Thus, one of the primary goals of the study was to study goal congruence of daily activities from the perspective of both members of a couple. The prior studies conducted by Gere et al. (2011) were not dyadic and reports of goal congruence were based on the reports of only one partner. The reliance on only one person’s perspective on the goal congruence of an activity with a relationship partner raises an interesting question regarding the accuracy of such reports. Can people accurately judge whether an activity is meeting the goals of their partner? How accurate are these judgments, really? And which relates to affective experiences more strongly: perceptions of goal congruence or actual goal congruence? Thus, the first goal of the study was to investigate the degree to which relationship partners can accurately perceive whether the goals of their partner are being met in an activity. The second goal was to compare the effects of perceived versus actual goal congruence on affective experiences.

Prior studies have also assumed that higher levels of overall goal congruence result in more frequent participation in goal-congruent activities (Gere et al., 2011, Gere & Schimmack, in press). However, this hypothesis has not been explicitly tested yet. Thus, the third goal of the daily diary study was to examine whether couples who report higher levels of goal congruence also report participating in goal-congruent activities more frequently at the daily level. My prediction was that couples who report greater congruence between their goals at the beginning of the study would also report that their activities meet the goals of both partners more frequently on a day-to-day basis compared to couples who report having goals that are less congruent.

In their prior work, Gere and colleagues (2011) only examined a limited number of outcome variables: positive affect, negative affect, and feelings of closeness to the partner. In the current study, I wanted to examine a set of variables that are more representative of well-being and relationship quality. More specifically, in addition to examining positive and negative affect, I also examined life satisfaction. With regards to relationship quality, I examined feelings of
satisfaction with the relationship and relationship commitment. Thus, the fourth goal of the study was to examine people’s experiences of activities based on goal congruence with regards to a broader conceptualization of well-being and with regards to relationship quality. I expected to find that partners would report higher levels of well-being and relationship satisfaction in goal-congruent activities than in goal-incongruent activities.

Finally, all of the existing studies of goal congruence have been cross-sectional (e.g., Gere et al., 2011, Gere & Schimmack, in press). In the current study, I added a short-term longitudinal component that couples completed after the daily diary period to examine whether initial levels of goal congruence would predict changes in well-being and relationship quality over time. Furthermore, in this component of the study, I also examined physical health as another indicator of overall well-being. Prior studies have linked goal pursuit to the experience of physical symptoms (Emmons & King, 1988), thus I wanted to test whether the goal congruence findings would also extend to physical health. Therefore, the fifth goal of the study was to examine short-term changes in well-being and relationship quality based on levels of goal congruence. I predicted that lower initial levels of goal congruence would be associated with decreases in well-being, increases in physical symptoms, and decreases in relationship quality over time.

1.4.2 Goal Congruence: A Longitudinal Study

In prior work, the degree of congruence between the goals of relationship partners has been shown to predict higher relationship quality and higher subjective well-being (Gere & Schimmack, in press; 2012). One limitation of these studies has been their cross-sectional design, which makes it unclear whether goal congruence has a causal effect on relationship quality and well-being. It is possible that people who are happy with their relationships evaluate their goals as congruent with their partner’s goals and those who are less happy evaluate their goals as less congruent with the goals of their partner. In order to show that goal congruence has a causal influence, it would be important to show that initial levels of goal congruence can predict changes in relationship quality and well-being over longer time periods. Thus, a longitudinal design is needed where the influence of goal congruence on the relationship and on subjective well-being can be examined over time. Thus, the primary goal of this longitudinal study was to recruit newly dating couples who are still getting to know one another, and follow them over time in order to examine how their initial levels of goal congruence influence their relationships.
If goal congruence is important in a relationship, then higher levels of incongruence between the goals of relationship partners should be associated with decreases in relationship quality. Higher levels of incongruence should also be associated with decreases in subjective well-being over time, especially if people report that they have been able to make less progress toward their goals as a result of the existing incongruence.

However, it is also possible that people change their goals in the context of their relationships. They may stop pursuing some goals and adopt new ones over time, which has implications for the level of congruence between the goals of the partners. By following newly dating couples over time, it is possible to examine whether people try to resolve incongruence between goals when such incompatibility arises. For example, when it becomes apparent that the partners have some goals that are incongruent, one or both of the partners may decide to stop pursuing those incongruent goals, or they may devalue those goals over time. This longitudinal study also provided an opportunity to examine how newly dating partners handle goal incongruence over time and what strategies, if any, they use to reduce the existing incongruence between their own and their partner’s goals, and what influence their strategies may have on their well-being and relationship quality.
Chapter 2
Daily Diary Study of Goal Pursuit in Intimate Relationships (Study 1)

2 Daily Diary Study of Goal Pursuit in Intimate Relationships (Study 1)

2.1 Study Overview

In this study, a sample of dating couples was recruited in order to examine the goal-congruence of relationship partners’ day-to-day activities and the influence of these activities on the partners’ emotional experiences, their relationship quality, and their subjective well-being. The couples filled out a number of questionnaire measures about their relationship, goals, and well-being at the beginning of the study, then participated in the daily diary portion of the study. In the daily diary portion, both partners completed reports on their joint activities with their partner at the end of the day on the days when they have spent time together. After completing 10 diary reports, the couples once again came back to the lab and filled out a number of questionnaires regarding their experiences and feelings about their relationship, goal pursuits, and well-being over the daily diary period.

The primary goals of the study were to examine a) the partners’ accuracy in their perceptions of whether an activity is meeting their partner’s goals or not, b) whether initial reports of goal congruence predict the proportion of goal-congruent activities the couple participates in, c) the partners’ experiences of goal-congruent activities (i.e., positive and negative affect, life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment), and d) possible short-term longitudinal effects of goal conflict on relationship quality and well-being (both physical and subjective well-being).

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Participants and Procedures

For this study, a sample of 65 heterosexual dating couples ($N = 130$) was recruited through advertisements on the University of Toronto St. George and Mississauga campuses. All couples were in a dating relationship. The partners were required to be currently not living together but
see each other at least 3 times per week in order to qualify for participation in the study. I recruited couples who were not living together to make it easier for partners to determine what their first and last activity of the day was and to get reports of a variety of activities using this method. The couples were only eligible to participate if they spent time together at least three days per week in order to ensure that their participation in the study would not go on for too long and each couple can complete the daily diaries within a relatively short amount of time (3-4 weeks at most).

The participants were on average 21.1 years of age ($SD = 4.18$) and have been romantically involved with their partner for an average of 16.7 months ($SD = 11.43$). The majority of participants were dating their partner exclusively (96%) and did not have children with their partner (two of the participants had children from a previous relationship). Reflective of the ethnic diversity of the Toronto area, the participants came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds: 25% were Western European, 23% were East Asian, 19% were South Asian, 11% were Southeast Asian, 10% were Eastern European, and 22% were of various other backgrounds (numbers do not add to 100% because participants could indicate more than one ethnic background). The majority of the participants were students (68%), although some were working part-time (19%) or full-time (5%), or were unemployed / looking for work (7%). One participant was on leave and another did not indicate a working status.

All couples confirmed their eligibility through email, after which they were scheduled to come into the laboratory for a 1-hour session to fill out a number of questionnaires. Once they finished filling out the questionnaires, a researcher spent about 5 minutes with the couple to explain the daily diary procedures. Partners received $10 each (or course credit for those enrolled in a first-year psychology class at the Mississauga campus) for completing this session. The partners were each asked to fill out ten daily reports online, independently from each other. They were to fill out a daily report only on days when they have spent time together and had to complete the report at the end of the day (or latest by noon the next day if they have forgotten or were unable to fill it out the same night). Both partners were emailed a link to the daily diary questionnaire and their participant number, which they entered for each daily report they completed. The reports were time stamped by the online system. When both partners had completed ten daily reports, they were asked to come back into the lab for a short 20-minute session and receive
payment. During this session they also completed a number of questionnaires and were paid $15 each ($10 or one course credit for the daily diaries and $5 for the exit session).

2.2.2 Measures

2.2.2.1 Intake Session Questionnaire

Each person filled out the questionnaires in a separate room, on a computer (only the relevant questionnaires are described below). After answering a number of demographic questions and questions about their relationship, they filled out the well-being measures. The first scale was the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which is a 5-item measure of general satisfaction with life. Two items from the original scale were modified to create two negatively worded items (in the original scale, all items are positively worded), which were reverse scored. Participants read five statements and were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An example item from the scale is “I am satisfied with my life” (α = .84). Ratings were averaged to yield an overall life satisfaction score, where higher scores indicate higher satisfaction with life (M = 4.71, SD = 1.32). In order to assess the affective components of subjective well-being, participants indicated how often they experience eight negative emotions (e.g., angry, sad, anxious) and six positive emotions (e.g., happy, cheerful, joyful) on a scale of 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). Ratings were averaged separately for the positive emotion and the negative emotion items to yield overall scores of positive (M = 5.28, SD = .91, α = .93) and negative affect (M = 3.62, SD = 1.01, α = .89). Higher scores indicate experiences of higher positive and negative affect, respectively.

Participants also answered a number of questions about their dating relationship. Satisfaction with the relationship was assessed with the satisfaction subscale of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). This is a 3-item measure that assesses satisfaction with the relationship. For each item, participants indicate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 (never or hardly at all) to 5 (always or extremely much). An example item from the scale is “How happy are you with your relationship with your partner?” (α = .85). Scores were averaged together to create an index of relationship satisfaction, where higher scores indicate greater satisfaction (M = 4.32, SD = .64). Relationship commitment was assessed with the reliable alliance subscale, which is also a 3-item measure. This scale assesses the degree to which they see their
relationship continuing into the future and their level of commitment to maintaining the relationship. For each item, participants indicated their level of commitment on a scale of 1 (*little or none*) to 5 (*the most*). An example item from the scale is “How sure are you that your relationship will continue in the years to come?” (*α = .89*). Scores were averaged together to create an index of relationship commitment, with higher scores indicating greater commitment (*M = 3.70, SD = .98*).

Next, participants were asked to list six goals that they currently actively pursue, in line with the procedures of Emmons (Emmons, 1986; Emmons, 1999). In this approach to eliciting goals, participants are asked to think about goals they try to pursue in all domains of their lives and list goals that they typically try to pursue. They are asked to list goals that are long-term and in order to make sure that these goals are actively pursued, participants also list three ways in which they are pursuing each of the goals. After listing their goals, they answered a number of questions about each goal. In order to assess goal progress, participants answered a question regarding their satisfaction with the amount of progress they have been making toward each goal. They rated their satisfaction on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). They also indicated how committed they were to the given goal and how important the given goals was to them with one item assessing each, rated on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Participants also responded to two items that assessed the level of conflict between the given goal and the goals of the relationship partner. For these two items, participants indicated the level of goal conflict on a scale of 1 (*not at all/never*) to 5 (*very much/always*). An example item is “Does this goal conflict with your partner’s goals?” The two items were averaged together across all six goals to form an overall index of goal conflict, with higher scores indicating higher levels of conflict (*M = 1.26, SD = .41*). This measure is the first measure used to assess goal congruence and because higher scores on this measure indicate higher goal conflict, I will refer to this measure as the ‘goal conflict’ measure.

After participants rated all six of their goals, they were also asked to list six goals that their partner is pursuing, using the same procedures that were used to list their own goals. After listing their partner’s goals, the software paired each of the participants’ own goals with each of the goals they listed for their partner, one-by-one. In other words, each of their own goals was matched one-by-one with each of the goals they listed for their partner, creating 36 goal pairs in total. For each pair of goals, participants were asked to consider how the two goals combine to
influence the relationship: whether they benefit the relationship, cause conflict in the relationship, or do not influence the relationship. They provided their ratings on a scale of 1 (very harmful) to 5 (very helpful), with the midpoint of the scale indicating no effects. Ratings across the 36 goal pairs were averaged to form an overall index of goal congruence, with higher scores indicating higher levels of goal congruence (M = 3.69, SD = .46). This measure is the second measure I used to assess goal congruence and because higher scores on this measure indicate higher goal congruence, I will refer to this measure as the ‘goal congruence’ measure.

Finally, participants also filled out a shortened version of the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist, which is a measure of physical symptoms (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974). This measure assesses physical symptoms of somatization with 12 items. For each physical symptom, participants rate how frequently they experienced the given symptom over the past four weeks on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Some of the symptoms are headaches, feeling low in energy or slowed down, and pains in the heart or chest. Ratings were averaged across the 12 items to create an overall score of physical symptoms, with higher scores indicating higher physical symptomatology (M = 1.77, SD = .63, α = .86).

2.2.2.2 Daily Diary Questionnaire

Each day when participants spent time together with their partner, they were asked to complete a daily report online, through a link sent to each participant. They also received their participant number in the email along with the link, which they entered into the daily report at each completion. Next, participants answered a number of questions regarding their day and activities with their partner (only the relevant, activity-specific measures are described below). There were two different versions of the diary: couples whose dyad number was an odd number answered questions about the first activity they did together on the diary day, whereas couples whose dyad number was an even number answered questions about the last activity they did together on the diary day. 2 couples did not complete any of the daily diaries and one additional male participant did not complete any daily diaries. Participants from the remaining 63 dyads completed a total of 1144 daily reports (men: 567 reports, M = 9.15 reports; women: 577 reports, M = 9.16 reports).

After answering questions about their overall day, participants were asked to describe either the first or the last activity they did together with their partner that day in an open-ended fashion. After providing the description of the activity, they indicated whether their activity met any of
their goals (yes or no) and whether their activity met any of their partner’s goals (yes or no). If the participants indicated that their activity did not meet any of their own or any of their partner’s goals, they explained why they and/or their partner participated in the activity given that it did not meet any goals for that person (themselves or their partner) in an open-ended fashion. If they indicated that their activity did meet their own and/or their partner’s goals, they were asked to list up to three goals that the activity met for themselves and their partner. Participants then indicated how they felt during the activity on 7-point scales, ranging from 1 (almost never/strongly disagree) to 7 (almost always/strongly agree). First, they indicated their experience of positive and negative emotions on 3 items each \( (M = 5.61, SD = 1.37, \alpha = .96 \text{ for positive}, \ M = 1.90, SD = 1.18, \alpha = .92 \text{ for negative}) \). Next, they indicated how satisfied they felt with their relationship using 4 items \( (M = 6.11, SD = 1.03, \alpha = .89) \) and how committed they felt to their relationship using 3 items \( (M = 6.35, SD = .92, \alpha = .88) \). Finally, they also rated to what extent they felt that they were making progress toward important goals using a single item \( (M = 4.85, SD = 1.73) \).

### 2.2.2.3 Exit Session Questionnaire

Once the partners completed ten online reports (or at least one of the partners), they returned to the lab to receive their payment and fill out questionnaires. All of the questionnaires they completed asked about their experiences over the past 4 weeks, which, for most couples, corresponded to the time period during which they were completing the diary entries. Out of the 63 couples who completed at least one online diary, 49 couples and the male from one additional couple completed the exit session.

During the exit session, participants completed a subset of the questionnaires that they also completed during the intake session, but this time the questionnaires asked specifically about the past four weeks. They first completed the measures of well-being, starting with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) over the past 4 weeks \( (M = 5.03, SD = 1.30, \alpha = .88) \), followed by their experiences of positive and negative emotions \( (M = 5.46, SD = 1.06, \alpha = .96 \text{ for positive}, \ M = 3.15, SD = 1.14, \alpha = .91 \text{ for negative}) \). Participants also completed the satisfaction and reliable alliance subscales of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), indicating how satisfied \( (M = 4.26, SD = .67, \alpha = .93) \) and how committed \( (M = 3.76, SD = 1.10, \alpha = .94) \) they felt to their partner over the past four weeks. They also
completed the somatization subscale of the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (Derogatis et al., 1974), indicating how often they experienced physical symptoms over the past four weeks ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .47$, $\alpha = .80$).

Finally, participants also answered a number of questions about the six goals that they listed during the intake session. Each participant was given a printout of the goals that they listed at intake and indicated whether they were still pursuing each of the listed goals (yes or no). They also indicated how much their pursuit of the goal generated conflict between themselves and their partner over the past four weeks on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Accuracy of Partner-Goal Perceptions

2.3.1.1 Analysis of Accuracy

In order to examine how accurate people are at perceiving whether their partner’s goals are being met by an activity, I focused on reports of activities where both partners were reporting on the same activity. For days where both partners provided a daily report ($N = 516$ days), two research assistants independently coded whether the male and the female were reporting on the same activity based on the open-ended activity descriptions provided by the participants. The agreement between the coders was high (96%) and cases of disagreement were resolved through discussion. Some typical examples of the activities that couples reported on are going out to eat, studying together, watching a movie or TV, and shopping. Partners provided reports on the same activities on a total of 424 days. I used this subset of reports to examine how accurate the partners were at determining whether an activity met their partner’s goals or not.

In the case of the men’s goals, men reported that the activity met their own goals on 341 occasions (80%). When they reported that the activity met their goals, their partners accurately reported that the activity met the men’s goals on 301 occasions and inaccurately reported that the activity did not meet the men’s goals on 40 occasions. Thus, when the activity met the men’s goals, their partners correctly perceived that their goals were being met 88% of the time. In contrast, when men reported that the activity did not meet their own goals, their partner’s accuracy was much worse. Men reported that the activity did not meet any of their goals on 83
occasions (20%). Their partner correctly perceived that their goals were not met on 40 occasions but incorrectly assumed that their goals were met on 43 occasions. Thus, women were able to accurately perceive that their partner’s goals were not being met only 48% of the time; an accuracy rate near chance levels. The overall accuracy rate of women’s perceptions of men’s goals was 80%, primarily due to the majority of the activities being activities that did meet men’s goals. In order to provide a statistical analysis of accuracy, I conducted a chi-square test to compare the expected frequencies to the actual frequencies of goals met and perceptions of goals met in a 2 by 2 table. This analysis indicated that the actual frequencies differ from the expected frequencies, as indicated by a significant chi-square value, $\chi^2 (1) = 57.98, p < .001$. To quantify the association between men’s reports of their goals and women’s accuracy in perceiving whether their partner’s goals are being met, I calculated the phi correlation between these two dichotomous variables. The phi correlation between the men’s and women’s reports was .37, indicating some accuracy but also a high level of error in women’s perceptions of their partner’s goals.

In the case of women’s goals, women reported that the activity met their own goals on 351 occasions (83%). When they reported that the activity met their goals, their partners accurately perceived that the women’s goals were met on 307 occasions and inaccurately reported that the activity did not meet any of the women’s goals on 44 occasions. Thus, when the activity met women’s goals, their partners correctly perceived that their goals were being met 87% of the time. In contrast, women reported that their goals were not met by the activity on 73 occasions (17%). Their partners correctly perceived that the women’s goals were not met on 44 occasions but incorrectly assumed that their goals were met on 29 occasions. Thus, men were able to accurately perceive that their partner’s goals were not being met only 60% of the time. The overall accuracy rate of men’s perceptions of women’s goals was 83%, similar to women’s overall accuracy rate. Once again, I conducted a chi-square test to compare the expected frequencies to actual frequencies of goals and perceived goals met. This analysis indicated that the actual frequencies differ from the expected frequencies, as indicated by a significant chi-square value, $\chi^2 (1) = 83.74, p < .001$. To quantify the association between women’s reports of their goals and men’s accuracy in perceiving whether their partner’s goals were met, I calculated the phi correlation between these two dichotomous variables. The phi correlation between the
women’s and men’s reports was .44, indicating some accuracy but also a high level of error in men’s perceptions of their partner’s goals.

2.3.1.2 Discussion of Accuracy Findings

The first goal of this study was to examine how accurate people’s perceptions are regarding the goals of their partner. My results indicated that this accuracy depended on whether the partner’s goals were being met in the given activity or not. When the activity did meet the goals of the partner, by and large, people were accurate in perceiving that the goals of their partners were being met. However, when the partner indicated that the activity is in fact not meeting any of his or her goals, people’s accuracy was only at about chance levels in their reports of whether their partners’ goals are being met. People’s overall levels of accuracy were high (about 80%), mainly because the partners most often took part in activities that met the goals of both partners. On average, in 70% of the couples’ activities the goals of both partners were being met.

Using the phi correlation as a measure of accuracy is important because it takes into account the base-rates of the activities that meet versus do not meet the goals of a partner. This correlation was only about .40 for both men and women, indicating that there is a considerable amount of inaccuracy in people’s perceptions of their partner’s goals. At the same time, it also indicates some degree of accuracy in goal perceptions. The size of the correlation is similar to other estimates of agreement between individuals who know each other relatively well, including romantic partners (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009). Potential reasons why people may be inaccurate in determining whether an activity meets their partner’s goals will be discussed in the general discussion section.

2.3.2 Goal Congruence and Proportion of Goal-Congruent Activities

2.3.2.1 Analysis of Proportion of Goal-Congruent Activities

Next, I examined whether ratings of overall goal congruence reported during the intake session would predict the proportion of goal-congruent activities the partners report having participated in. In order to examine this question, I wanted to calculate ratings of goal congruence at the level of the dyad. For each of the partners, I calculated the mean level of goal conflict by averaging their ratings of goal conflict across the six goals that they listed (men: $M = 1.28$, $SD = .42$, women: $M = 1.19$, $SD = .28$). I also calculated the level of goal congruence by averaging the
ratings of the degree of congruence between their own goals and the goals they indicated their partner is pursuing for both men and women (men: $M = 3.65, SD = .48$, women: $M = 3.72, SD = .45$). However, I was not able to create a dyadic measure of goal conflict and goal congruence because men’s and women’s ratings of goal congruence were uncorrelated, as were their ratings of goal conflict (correlation between men’s and women’s conflict ratings, $r = .02$; correlation between men’s and women’s congruence ratings, $r = .03$). Given that conflict and congruence ratings were correlated within person (correlation between men’s conflict and congruence ratings: $r = -.23$, correlation between women’s conflict and congruence ratings: $r = -.21$), I recoded the goal congruence scores so that higher scores reflected lower goal congruence and averaged these scores together with the goal conflict ratings to create a single goal conflict score for men and women separately.

Finally, to calculate the proportion of goal-congruent activities the couple engaged in, I used the self-reports of men and women regarding whether the activity met their own goals or not to code each day’s activity on whether it met the goals of both partners (yes = 1, no = 0). I then averaged this dichotomous variable across all of the days for each couple to create a score that reflected the proportion of the couple’s activities that met the goals of both partners ($M = .71, SD = .31$). I used this proportion score as my dependent variable, whereas the aggregate goal conflict scores were used as independent variables. For the analysis, I regressed the proportion of goal-congruent activities score onto men’s and women’s aggregate goal conflict scores simultaneously. Contrary to predictions, this analysis indicated that goal conflict ratings of men and women did not significantly predict the proportion of goal-congruent activities the partners reported participating in (men: $\beta = .12, SE = .11, p = .29$, women: $\beta = -.13, SE = .14, p = .37$).

### 2.3.2.2 Discussion of Proportion of Goal-Congruent Activities

In sum, contrary to my expectations, I did not find that goal congruence was associated with the proportion of goal congruent activities partners engage in. Although these results are disappointing, there are several methodological issues that may explain why I did not find this expected association. First, the partners only reported on ten activities that they took part in together. A sample of ten activities may be simply too few to detect differences between couples in the proportion of goal-congruent activities they take part in. In addition, these ten activities may also not be representative of the partners’ activities more generally. Partners were asked to
report on either the first or the last activity they participated in together that day and it is possible that things couples do first or last when they see each other are not highly representative of the things they do together more generally. Another problem is that the majority of the activities that partners reported on were goal-congruent activities, which resulted in a restricted range of activities for analysis with most couples having a high proportion of goal-congruent activities. This reduced power to find differences between couples in the proportion of their goal-congruent activities. Thus, there may have been several problems with the methodology I used in this study that may have prevented me from being able to properly test whether couples with more congruent goals participate in goal-congruent activities more frequently.

2.3.3 Experiences of Goal-Congruent and Goal-Incongruent Activities

2.3.3.1 Analysis of Experiences of Activities

I also examined how partners experience goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities and planned to compare actual goal congruence with perceived goal congruence. Using dyadic data from both partners, I examined affective well-being, experiences of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and goal conflict. I expected to find that partners would feel more positive emotions, less negative emotions, higher relationship satisfaction and commitment to their partner, and would feel that they are making more goal progress in goal-congruent activities. I did not expect to find differences based on perceived versus actual goal congruence.

For all of these analyses I conducted path analysis with the software MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), using the dyad as the unit of analysis. Given that the observations were not independent (days within couples), I controlled for the lack of independence in the data by using the CLUSTER command in MPlus, which adjusts standard errors of estimates based on the level of dependence present in the data. In each of the analyses, the predictor variables were 2 main effects, indicating whether the activity met the male’s goals (yes = 1, no = 0), and whether the activity met the female’s goals (yes = 1, no = 0), and the interaction between these two main effects, indicating whether the activity met both partners’ goals (yes = 1, no = 0). My analyses were dyadic, such that I regressed the outcome variables of the males and females simultaneously on the three predictor variables.
In each set of analyses only the dependent variables changed, the three predictors remained the same. The outcome variables of men and women were allowed to correlate freely, given that both persons took part in the same activity and their experiences are therefore likely to be related. The paths were constrained to be equal across genders (the results do not change if paths are unconstrained unless otherwise noted). Given that the predictor variables were dummy variables, I group-mean centered the continuous outcome variables (i.e., centered around each person’s own mean) in the analyses in order to eliminate the influence of individual differences. This way the outcomes of the analyses reflect pure situational effects, free of the influences of individual differences on the variables. To assess overall model fit, I relied on the following indices: a non-significant chi-square value, a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .90, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .10 or lower, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .08 or lower (Kline, 2005). For all of the analyses, I report the fully standardized estimates, standard errors, and the 95% confidence intervals of the estimate.

Figure 1. General Model Used to Analyze the Partner’s Experiences in their Joint Activities Based on Actual Goal Congruence.
First, I examined experiences in these activities based on reports of actual goal-congruence (i.e., based on the reports of both the men and women about whether the activity was meeting their own goals or not). The general model used for each of the analyses is presented visually in Figure 1. On the left side of the figure are the three predictors: men’s reports of whether their goals were met, women’s reports of whether their goals were met, and the interaction between men’s and women’s goals (i.e., both their goals were met or not). On the right side of the figure are the outcome variables separately for men and women and a correlation between them, given that their experiences of the activity are expected to be related.

The first outcome variable examined was affective well-being. Affective well-being was calculated by subtracting the mean of the experienced negative emotions from the mean of the experienced positive emotions. (Results do not differ when positive and negative emotions are analyzed separately.) Model fit was good, $\chi^2 (3) = 4.34, p = .23$, CFI = .984, RMSEA = .032, SRMR = .026, but the results indicated that although the affective well-being of men was correlated with the affective well-being of women ($.48, SE = .06, p < .001, 95\% CI [.37, .59]$), none of the goal variables were significant predictors of affective well-being. Similar results were found for relationship satisfaction; although model fit was good, $\chi^2 (3) = 2.74, p = .43$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .020, none of the goal variables were significant predictors of feelings of relationship satisfaction. The partners’ feelings of relationship satisfaction were correlated ($.40, SE = .09, p < .001, CI [.22, .57]$). Commitment also followed the same pattern of results with good model fit, $\chi^2 (3) = 2.79, p = .43$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .026, a correlation between the partners’ feelings of commitment ($.15, SE = .05, p = .005, CI [.05, .26]$), but no significant prediction by the goals variables. Lastly, I examined feelings of making goal progress. Model fit was good, $\chi^2 (3) = 4.02, p = .26$, CFI = .990, RMSEA = .028, SRMR = .015, and the partners’ feelings of goal progress were correlated ($.32, SE = .05, p < .001, CI [.23, .42]$). Here, the activity meeting one’s own goal was a significant predictor of goal progress for both men ($.37, SE = .11, p = .001, CI [.15, .59]$) and women ($.36, SE = .11, p = .001, CI [.14, .59]$).

Next, I examined partners’ experiences of these activities based on reports of perceived goal congruence. Here, each partner’s outcome was regressed on his or her perceptions of whether their activity was meeting their partner’s goals, instead of the partner’s own report, their reports
Figure 2. General Model Used to Analyze the Partner’s Experiences in their Joint Activities Based on Perceived Goal Congruence.

of whether the activity was meeting their own goals, and the interaction between them. The general model used for each of the analyses is presented visually in Figure 2. On the left side of the figure are the predictors: each partner’s report of their own goals, their perceptions of their partner’s goals, and the interaction between their own and the perceived partner goals. On the left side of the figure are the separate outcome variables for men and women and a correlation between them to reflect their shared experience of the activity. The paths that have been constrained to be equal are marked with the same letter.

Starting with affective well-being, model fit was good, $\chi^2 (9) = 12.77, p = .17$, CFI = .947, RMSEA = .028, SRMR = .035, and the affective well-being of the partners was correlated (.41, SE = .06, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.30, .53]). None of the goal variables predicted affective well-being significantly. For relationship satisfaction, model fit was acceptable, $\chi^2 (9) = 17.26, p = .04$, CFI = .861, RMSEA = .042, SRMR = .050, and the partners’ feelings of satisfaction were correlated (.36, SE = .08, $p < .001$, CI [.20, .53]). The goal variables again did not predict feelings of satisfaction significantly. For relationship commitment, model fit was acceptable, $\chi^2 (9) = 12.93, p = .17$, CFI = .778, RMSEA = .029, SRMR = .042, and the partners’ feelings of commitment
were correlated (.14, \(SE = .05\), \(p = .009\), CI [.03, .24]) but the goal variables did not predict commitment significantly. Finally, I examined goal progress, which showed good model fit, \(\chi^2(9) = 6.64, p = .67\), CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .027, and a correlation between partners’ feelings of goal progress (.30, \(SE = .05\), \(p < .001\), CI [.21, .40]). The activity meeting one’s own goals was a significant predictor of feelings of goal progress for both men (.31, \(SE = .07\), \(p < .001\), CI [.20, .46]) and women (.30, \(SE = .07\), \(p < .001\), CI [.19, .45]). When the activity met both partners’ goals, this further increased feelings of making goal progress for both men (.17, \(SE = .10\), \(p = .081\), CI [.005, .41]) and women (.17, \(SE = .10\), \(p = .080\), CI [.008, .39]).

2.3.3.2 Discussion of Experiences of Activities

Contrary to my expectations, goal congruence was unrelated to people’s affective well-being, feelings of relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment. It did not matter whether the analyses were based on actual goal congruence (i.e., based on each partner’s report of their own goals) or on perceptions of goal congruence. Once again, these findings may indicate methodological problems that were not anticipated. In this sample, 71% of couples’ activities were goal-congruent activities. For these activities the three predictors in the model are all coded as 1 and are thus not distinguished from one another. The restricted range of the types of activities in the sample may have prevented me from being able to properly test associations between goal-congruence and emotional experiences. In order to confirm that this restricted range may be playing a role in the outcome of the analyses, I reran the analyses for affective well-being, using each person’s reports of whether their own goals were met as the only predictor of affective well-being. Given that being able to pursue one’s own goals has been repeatedly shown to be strongly associated with positive and negative affect (Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1999; King, 2008; Lazarus, 1991), being able to meet one’s own goals should be predictive of higher affective well-being. If there is a restricted range in the sample such that the majority of activities meet one’s own goals, the dummy-coded variable that codes for whether one’s own goals are being met should not predict affective well-being even if it is entered as a sole predictor. Indeed, this analysis indicated that for both men and women, being able to pursue their own goals was not a significant predictor of affective well-being. Given the existence of much prior research that has established a strong link between these two constructs, it seems that the sample is indeed constrained by restricted range, with the majority of activities meeting the goals of both partners.
2.3.4 Short-Term Longitudinal Changes

2.3.4.1 Analysis of Changes Over Time

Finally, I also wanted to examine whether goal conflict is associated with changes in relationship satisfaction and well-being over the daily diary period. Of the 65 couples who began the study 50 couples also completed the exit session (for one of the couples, only the male completed the exit session). The exit session took place about one month after the initial intake session, within 2 weeks of the partners having completed the online diaries. During the exit session, all of the questions the participants answered were asked regarding the past four weeks (e.g., life satisfaction over the past four weeks) to overlap with the daily diary period. I predicted that higher goal conflict would be associated with decreases in relationship quality and well-being over the daily diary period.

To conduct the analyses, I used the software HLM (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2004) to control for dependence between data from relationship partners. In these analyses, my predictor variables were participants’ mean ratings of goal conflict for the six goals they listed for themselves, and their goal congruence ratings between each of their own and each of their partner’s goals. Goal conflict and goal congruence ratings were examined separately. Given that I was interested in changes over time, where possible, I controlled for baseline scores on the construct of interest, assessed at the intake session. For example, when examining relationship satisfaction reported at the exit session, I controlled for initial levels of relationship satisfaction reported at the intake session. However, I first conducted analyses of the concurrent associations between the variables (where relevant), using intake session data, in order to examine whether the expected associations are also present concurrently. All of the predictor variables were grand-mean centered. Intercepts were estimated as fixed with random variation around the fixed estimate permitted, whereas slopes were estimated as fixed.

I first examined whether ratings of goal conflict over the pursuit of the six goals listed by the person predicted the amount of conflict experienced over the same six goals during the daily diary period. Thus, I regressed the levels of conflict reported in the exit session on the levels of conflict reported during the intake session. As expected, initial ratings of conflict positively predicted the amount of conflict experienced over the daily diary period ($B = .59, SE = .16, p =$
.001). However, ratings of goal congruence between own and the partner’s goals did not predict conflict over the daily diary period significantly (B = -.12, SE = .12, p = .30).

Next, I examined concurrent relations and changes in well-being. Starting with life satisfaction, concurrently, although ratings of goal conflict were not significantly related to life satisfaction (B = -.16, SE = .33, p = .62), higher ratings of goal congruence were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (B = .71, SE = .25, p = .006). To examine changes over time, controlling for initial levels of life satisfaction, ratings of both goal conflict (B = -.73, SE = .29, p = .015) and goal congruence (B = .60, SE = .20, p = .004) predicted changes in life satisfaction. Higher goal conflict and lower goal congruence were associated with decreases in life satisfaction.

Examining positive affect concurrently, once again, although ratings of goal conflict were not significantly related to positive affect (B = -.23, SE = .22, p = .301), higher ratings of goal congruence were associated with higher positive affect (B = .62, SE = .17, p = .001). Controlling for initial levels of positive affect, however, neither goal conflict (B = -.26, SE = .24, p = .28), nor goal congruence (B = .21, SE = .17, p = .22) predicted changes in positive affect significantly.

Examining negative affect concurrently, again, ratings of goal conflict were unrelated to negative affect (B = .05, SE = .26, p = .85), whereas higher goal congruence was associated with lower negative affect (B = -.35, SE = .20, p = .078), although this effect was marginal. Controlling for initial levels of negative affect, goal conflict did not predict significant changes in negative affect (B = .40, SE = .26, p = .13), but higher goal congruence predicted decreases in negative affect (B = -.49, SE = .17, p = .006).

Finally, concurrently examining physical symptoms, ratings of goal conflict were unrelated to experiencing physical symptoms (B = .15, SE = .15, p = .347), whereas higher goal congruence predicted lower physical symptoms (B = -.21, SE = .12, p = .084), although this effect was marginal. Controlling for initial levels of physical symptoms, neither goal conflict (B = .17, SE = .11, p = .13), nor goal congruence predicted significant changes in physical symptoms (B = -.10, SE = .08, p = .21).

In addition to the well-being variables, I also examined relationship variables. Concurrently, relationship commitment was unrelated to both goal conflict (B = -.33, SE = .20, p = .102) and to
goal congruence ($B = .17, SE = .16, p = .293$). However, controlling for initial levels of relationship commitment, goal conflict was associated with decreases in commitment ($B = -.46, SE = .22, p = .044$), whereas goal congruence was unrelated to changes in commitment ($B = .09, SE = .16, p = .57$). Concurrently, relationship satisfaction was not significantly related to goal conflict ($B = -.20, SE = .15, p = .186$) and it was marginally associated with higher goal congruence ($B = .19, SE = .12, p = .098$). Controlling for initial levels of relationship satisfaction, goal conflict was associated with decreases in satisfaction ($B = -.31, SE = .15, p = .034$), whereas goal congruence was associated with increases in satisfaction ($B = .19, SE = .10, p = .055$) over time.

2.3.4.2 Discussion of Changes Over Time

In this section, I was interested in examining whether ratings of goal conflict and goal congruence predict changes in well-being and relationship quality over time. An unexpected finding was that ratings of goal conflict over the six goals that participants listed as actively pursuing were not associated with any of the well-being and relationship quality variables concurrently. Many of the estimates were in the expected direction but did not reach significance. Given that these effects are not expected to be large effects, it is possible that power was low with the current sample size. Goal conflict was, however, associated with changes over time. More specifically, goal conflict predicted declines in life satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship satisfaction over time. The results were different for people’s ratings of congruence between their partner’s and their own goals. Ratings of goal congruence were associated with all of the well-being variables and with relationship satisfaction concurrently. It was only unrelated to relationship commitment. Initial ratings of goal congruence also predicted changes in many of the variables over time. More specifically, higher levels of goal congruence were associated with increases in life satisfaction, decreases in negative affect, and increases in relationship satisfaction over time. These results suggest that goal congruence is associated with important relationship and well-being indicators, and that higher levels of goal congruence may also influence relationships over time, such that partners with more congruent goals experience increased relational and personal benefits.
2.4 Summary of Daily Diary Study Findings

In sum, several novel findings emerged from this study but at the same time, some methodological limitations also emerged that made it difficult to test some of my main hypotheses. The first interesting finding was regarding partners’ accuracy in perceiving whether an activity was meeting their partner’s goals or not. The phi correlation between reports of one’s own goals and the partner’s report of one’s goals was around .40 for both men and women. This correlation is similar to the size of self-informant correlations typically found for well-being indicators (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009), indicating that people are no more or less accurate in their perceptions of whether their partner’s goals are being met than in their perceptions of their partner’s well-being. These results suggest that there is sufficient validity in partners’ reports of each other’s goals, especially considering that this was a single-item measure, which also contains considerable measurement error. Validity in these reports will make it possible to distinguish between ‘actual’ and ‘perceived’ goal congruence and compare their effects on people’s experiences. The results also indicated that there is considerable error in people’s perceptions of their partner’s goals and that perceptions of goal congruence may at times be illusory rather than real. In the future it will be important to investigate what factors play a role in the accuracy of people’s perceptions and whether perceived congruence is more important than actual congruence.

The second interesting finding that emerged was that ratings of congruence between one’s own goals and the goals of the partner were associated with relational and personal well-being both concurrently and over time. Results showed that higher levels of goal congruence predicted increases in life satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction, as well as decreases in negative affect. These results suggest that the level of congruence between the goals of relationship partners may play an important role in their relationships, possibly exerting an influence on their well-being and relationship quality over time.

Finally, some important methodological limitations emerged that made it difficult to test some of my major predictions with the current study design. This problem emerged from the fact that couples primarily reported on activities that met the goals of both partners (71%), restricting the range of activities available for analysis. This resulted in problems when testing two hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that couples who report higher goal congruence would engage in goal-
congruent activities more frequently than couples who report lower levels of goal congruence. Given that most of the activities sampled were goal-congruent, no differences emerged between couples based on their levels of goal congruence. This problem was also compounded by the fact that each couple only completed ten daily reports, which resulted in too few observations in total and therefore, even fewer observations of goal-incongruent activities. Thus, I could not properly test the hypothesis that proportion of couples’ goal-congruent activities is associated with their overall level of goal congruence.

The second hypothesis that was difficult to test properly with this restricted range of activities was the association between people’s emotional experiences and the goal-congruence of the activity. In this analysis, goal congruence (actual or perceived) was unrelated to people’s emotions and feelings about their relationships. Confirming the problem of restricted range was the fact that even whether the activity met one’s own goals was unrelated to affect, which is contrary to evidence from a large body of research (e.g., King, 2008). With the majority of the activities meeting the goals of the partners, the dummy-coded variables had little predictive power even on their own. In order to detect any effects of goal congruence, a larger sample of activities is needed; one that includes a variety of goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities, and activities that do not meet either partner’s goals. The findings of this study, including the methodological limitations, and their implications for the influence of goal congruence on relationships and well-being are considered in greater detail in the general discussion section.
Chapter 3
Longitudinal Study of Goal Pursuit in Intimate Relationships (Study 2)

3 Longitudinal Study of Goal Pursuit in Intimate Relationships (Study 2)

3.1 Study Overview

The goal of this longitudinal study was to examine goal pursuit, relationship quality, and subjective well-being over time in a sample of newly dating couples. I recruited newly dating couples because when partners first start dating, they do not know each other very well and are in the process of getting to know each other’s goals and values. In these new relationships, it is possible to see how couples deal with goal conflict as it emerges in their relationship and what they do to resolve goal conflict. Thus, the goal of the study was to follow newly dating couples over time to examine how people adjust their goals to the goals of their partner and how goal adjustment may influence the relationship and their well-being over time. Furthermore, I also examined whether initial levels of goal conflict predict decreases in relationship quality and goal progress over time, which, in turn, should result in decreases in subjective well-being.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants and Procedures

I recruited a sample of 78 (N = 156) newly dating heterosexual couples, who have been dating for 4 months or less at the start of the study (M = 2.95 months, SD = 1.39). Couples were required to be dating for four months or less because I wanted to ensure that the partners are still working on establishing their relationship and are in the process of getting to know one another. Participants were recruited through advertisements on campus at the University of Toronto. The mean age of the sample was 21.2 years (SD = 4.96). The majority of the participants were students (66.5%), but some worked part-time (19.4%) or full-time (9.0%), and indicated that they were unemployed or looking for work (5.2%). The majority of the participants were dating their partner exclusively (97.4%), did not have any children (98.1%), and were not living together with their partner (92.9%). The participants came from various ethnic backgrounds: 39.4% were Western European, 24.5% were East Asian, 12.9% were South Asian, 12.3% were Eastern
European, 11% were Southeast Asian, 6.4% were Caribbean/South American, and the remaining 5.8% were from various other backgrounds (the percentages do not add to 100% because people could indicate multiple backgrounds).

Interested couples contacted the lab through email to set up an appointment for the first session of the study. The partners filled out a series of questionnaires on computers in separate rooms and received $15 each for the first session (or 1 course credit and $5 if they were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the Mississauga campus). The couple was contacted again 3 months after their first session to find out if they were still dating or not. If they were still dating, they were invited to come in for the second session of the study, for which each partner was paid $10 (or received 1 course credit if they were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the Mississauga campus). Out of the 78 couples who started the study, 59 couples participated in the second session (11 couples broke up by the second session, 8 couples dropped out of the study).

3.2.2 Measures

3.2.2.1 Session 1 Measures

Each participant filled out the questionnaires in a separate room, on a computer (only the relevant questionnaires are described below). The questionnaires began with a series of demographic and relationship-related questions (e.g., length and status of relationship). Next, they filled out the well-being measures, which were the same questionnaires also used in the daily diary study. To assess overall life satisfaction, participants filled out the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Once again, two items were modified to create negatively worded items, which were reverse scored. Each statement was rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Ratings were averaged for an overall life satisfaction score, where higher scores indicate higher satisfaction with life ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.28, \alpha = .85$). In order to assess positive and negative emotions, participants rated how often they experience eight negative (e.g., angry, sad, anxious) and six positive emotions (e.g., happy, cheerful, joyful) on a scale of 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). Ratings were averaged separately for the positive emotions ($M = 5.42, SD = .85, \alpha = .91$) and the negative emotions ($M = 3.37, SD = .94, \alpha = .86$). Higher scores indicate experiences of higher positive and negative affect, respectively.
Participants also answered a number of questions about their levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. Satisfaction was assessed with the 3-item satisfaction subscale of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (never or hardly at all) to 5 (always or extremely much). Scores were averaged together to create an index of relationship satisfaction, where higher scores indicate higher satisfaction (M = 4.37, SD = .71, α = .88). Commitment was assessed with the 3-item reliable alliance subscale. Each item was rated on a scale of 1 (little or none) to 5 (the most). Scores were averaged together to create an index of relationship commitment, with higher scores indicating higher commitment (M = 3.35, SD = 1.10, α = .89).

Participants then listed six long-term, actively-pursued, current goals in any domain of their lives and listed up to three ways in which they are pursuing the given goal for each goal they listed (Emmons, 1986; Emmons, 1999). They then answered a number of questions about each goal. One question assessed their satisfaction with the amount of progress they have been making toward the given goal on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). An overall index of goal progress was created by averaging participants’ scores across all six goals, where higher ratings indicated greater goal progress (M = 3.45, SD = .67). They next indicated how committed they were to each of the goals and how important each goal was to them, both on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Participants also responded to the same two items regarding the level of conflict between the given goal and the goals of the relationship partner as in Study 1 on a scale of 1 (not at all/never) to 5 (very much/always). These two items were averaged across all six goals to form an overall index of goal conflict, with higher scores indicating higher levels of conflict (M = 1.38, SD = .55). This measure will be referred to as the ‘goal conflict’ measure.

Next, participants also listed six goals that their partner is pursuing, and for each goal listed 3 ways in which their partner is pursuing the given goal. The software then paired each of the participant’s own goals with each of the goals they listed for their partner, one-by-one, to create 36 goal pairs. For each goal pair, they rated how the two goals combine to influence the relationship: whether they benefit the relationship, cause conflict in the relationship, or do not influence the relationship. Ratings were made on a scale of 1 (very harmful) to 5 (very helpful), with the midpoint of the scale indicating no effect of the goals on the relationship. Ratings were averaged across the goal pairs to form an overall index of goal conflict, with higher scores
indicating higher levels of goal congruence \(M = 3.60, SD = .40\). This measure will be referred to as the ‘goal congruence’ measure.

### 3.2.2.2 Session 2 Measures

In the second session of the study, the questionnaires were a subset of those questionnaires that were completed during the first session, and one new questionnaire about previous goals. All of the questionnaires about their well-being, the relationship, and their own and their partner’s goals that were included in Session 1 were also included and assessed again in Session 2.

Participants once again started by filling out the well-being measures. They completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) which provided a measure of overall life satisfaction \(M = 5.29, SD = 1.16, \alpha = .82\). Next, they completed the measures assessing positive and negative affect, which assessed their experiences of negative affect with eight items \(M = 3.33, SD = .89, \alpha = .87\) and their experiences of positive affect with six items \(M = 5.41, SD = .78, \alpha = .90\).

Next, they completed measures regarding their relationship. Using the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), they indicated their level of satisfaction with the relationship using the relationship satisfaction subscale \(M = 4.39, SD = .70, \alpha = .93\), and they indicated their commitment to the relationship using the reliable alliance subscale \(M = 3.73, SD = 1.07, \alpha = .93\).

In this session, participants once again listed six long-term goals that they were actively pursuing in any domain of their lives (Emmons, 1986; Emmons, 1999). After listing the goals, they rated their satisfaction with the amount of progress they have been making for each of the six goals, which were averaged for analysis \(M = 3.37, SD = .74\). Participants also rated the degree of conflict between each goal and their partner’s goals using the same two items as described above for each of the six goals, which were averaged across the six goals for analysis \(M = 1.36, SD = .51\). After their ratings of their own goals, each partner also listed six goals that their partner is pursuing, which were then paired, one-by-one, with each of the goals they listed for themselves. Each goal pair was rated on the degree of benefit or conflict for the relationship. These ratings were then averaged across all 36 goals pairs to prove a measure of goal congruence for analysis \(M = 3.66, SD = .44\).
At the end of the questionnaire, each participant was given a list of their goals from the first session of the study. For each of the six goals, participants were first asked whether they are still pursuing the given goal (yes = 1, no = 0) \((M = .88, SD = .21)\). They then rated how important the goal is to them currently on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) \((M = 4.08, SD = .68)\). On the same rating scale, they also indicated how committed they are to the goal currently \((M = 3.77, SD = .74)\), and to what degree the goal conflicts with their partner’s goals \((M = 1.40, SD = .78)\).

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Concurrent Relations

3.3.1.1 Data Analysis Strategy

First, I wanted to examine concurrent relations between the variables at Session 1 in order to check whether my results replicate the findings of previous research. I used structural equation modeling with the software MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) to test the relations between the variables of interest. I conducted dyadic analysis, such that the unit of analysis is the dyad. To assess overall fit of the model, I relied on the same model fit indices as in the daily diary study: a non-significant chi-square value, a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .90, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .10 or lower, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .08 or lower (Kline, 2005). For each of the effects, I report fully standardized coefficients, standard errors, and the 95% confidence intervals. When confidence intervals do not include zero, it is significantly different from \(p < .05\) and when the confidence intervals of coefficients do not overlap, they are significantly different from one another at the \(p < .05\) level.

In the model, I modeled subjective well-being as latent variables for the men and women separately, using their scores on the measures of positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction as indicators to identify the latent variable. I also modeled relationship satisfaction as latent variables separately for men and women, using the three items from the Network of Relationships Inventory as indicators. I modeled goal congruence as a dyadic latent variable using four indicators: men’s ratings of goal congruence, women’s ratings of goal congruence, men’s ratings of goal conflict, and women’s ratings of goal conflict. I modeled goal congruence
as a dyadic variable because the conflict between the goals of the relationship partners occurs at the level of the dyad, not at the level of the individual. Factor loadings on the latent variables were constrained to be equal across men and women. I modeled goal progress as observed variables separately for men and women, using their mean ratings of goal progress across the six goals they listed.

I tested a model that corresponds to the arguments made in prior work (Gere et al., 2010, Gere & Schimmack, in press). I assumed that goal congruence would predict goal progress for both men and women, which would in turn predict subjective well-being. I also assumed that goal congruence predicts relationship satisfaction, which would, in turn, also predict subjective well-being. I also tested the significance of these mediated paths directly, using the MODEL INDIRECT command in MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2007).

Figure 3. Relations between Well-Being, Relationship Satisfaction, Goal Progress, and Goal Congruence.
### Table 1
Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables at Session 1

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Note: F = female, M = male, RSAT = relationship satisfaction, LS = life satisfaction, NA = negative affect, PA = positive affect, Congr. = goal congruence.

### Analysis Results

The overall fit of the model was good, $\chi^2 (136) = 126.83$, $p = .70$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 (90% CI [.00, .044]), SRMR = .089 (see Figure 3 for the final model; see Table 1 for zero-order correlations between the variables). Consistent with my expectations, higher goal congruence predicted greater goal progress for both men ($.49$, $SE = .10$, CI [.30, .67]) and women ($.50$, $SE = .09$, CI [.32, .69]). Higher goal congruence was also associated with higher relationship satisfaction for both men ($.73$, $SE = .10$, CI [.48, .98]) and women ($.54$, $SE = .14$, CI [.26, .82]). Greater goal progress was associated with higher well-being for both men ($.25$, $SE = .11$, CI [.04, .46]) and women ($.44$, $SE = .09$, CI [.26, .63]). The mediated paths between goal congruence and well-being, through goal progress were significant for both men ($.12$, $SE = .06$, $p = .034$) and women ($.22$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, higher relationship satisfaction was also associated with higher well-being for both men ($.39$, $SE = .09$, CI [.20, .57]) and women ($.37$, $SE = .08$, CI [.20, .53]). This mediated path between goal congruence and well-being, through relationship satisfaction, was significant for both men ($.28$, $SE = .09$, $p = .001$) and women ($.20$, $SE = .07$, $p = .005$). Men’s and women’s well-being was correlated ($.38$, $SE = .14$, CI [.11, .66]);
however, controlling for these effects, their relationship satisfaction was not significantly correlated (.15, SE = .22, CI [-.29, .58]).

3.3.1.3 Discussion of Concurrent Analysis Results

The results of this analysis of concurrent relations between the variables is in line with the findings of prior research and with the assertions of researchers who have argued that goal congruence is associated with satisfaction with goal progress, and thus, with well-being (Gere et al., 2011; Gere & Schimmack, in press). I found that higher levels of goal congruence were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, which were in turn associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Furthermore, higher levels of goal congruence were also associated with being able to make greater progress towards goals, which was also associated with higher levels of well-being. In other words, these results suggest that goal congruence may contribute to higher levels of well-being by allowing greater goal progress and supporting higher relationship quality.

3.3.2 Longitudinal Relations

3.3.2.1 Data Analysis Strategy

In the second analysis, I wanted to test the relations between the variables of interest longitudinally. The goal of this analysis was to test whether goal congruence predicts changes in goal progress and relationship satisfaction longitudinally, across a three-month time period with this sample of newly dating couples. Once again, structural equation modeling with the software MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) was used to test the predictions. I conducted dyadic analysis, so that the unit of analysis is the dyad, however, instead of using a latent-variable model, I used path analysis. In path analysis, each construct is modeled as an observed variable (Kline, 2005). Each construct was represented as a single score, which was calculated by averaging the scores of the indicators of the given construct (e.g., subjective well-being was a composite of low negative affect, high positive affect, and high life satisfaction). This analysis strategy was used because the complexity of the dyadic, longitudinal model in combination with a relatively small sample size made the use of path analysis more feasible than a latent-variable model.

In this analysis, I assumed the same relations between variables at both time points. That is, I assumed that at each time point, goal congruence would predict goal progress and relationship
satisfaction, both of which would then predict subjective well-being for both men and women. I also assumed that scores on each construct at Time 1 would predict scores on the same construct at Time 2. Finally, I tested between-construct relations across time. More specifically, I tested whether goal congruence at Time 1 would predict changes in relationship satisfaction and goal progress across time.

To assess the overall fit of the path model, I relied on the same model fit indices as above: a non-significant chi-square value, a comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .90, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .10 or lower, and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .08 or lower (Kline, 2005). For each of the effects, the fully standardized coefficients, standard errors, and the 95% confidence intervals are reported. When confidence intervals do not include zero, the estimate is significantly different from zero at $p < .05$ and when the confidence intervals of two coefficients do not overlap, they are significantly different from one another at the $p < .05$ level.

### 3.3.2.2 Analysis Results

The overall fit of the model was acceptable, $\chi^2(71) = 88.29$, $p = .08$, CFI = .951, RMSEA = .056 (90% CI [.00, .09]), SRMR = .123 (see Figure 4 for the final model; see Table 2 for zero-order correlations between the variables). Consistent with predictions, at each time point, higher goal congruence predicted greater goal progress for both men (time 1: $\.22$, SE $=.08$, CI [.06, .37]; time 2: $\.16$, SE $=.08$, CI [.01, .31]) and women (time 1: $\.22$, SE $=.08$, CI [.07, .37]; time 2: $\.15$, SE $=.07$, CI [.01, .30]). Higher goal congruence also predicted higher relationship satisfaction for both men (time 1: $\.41$, SE $=.09$, CI [.23, .59]; time 2: $\.23$, SE $=.08$, CI [.07, .38]) and women (time 1: $\.28$, SE $=.10$, CI [.07, .48]; time 2: $\.20$, SE $=.07$, CI [.06, .34]). As expected, greater goal progress predicted higher subjective well-being for both men (time 1: $\.24$, SE $=.10$, CI [.05, .43]; time 2: $\.28$, SE $=.10$, CI [.09, .47]) and women (time 1: $\.43$, SE $=.08$, CI [.26, .59]; time 2: $\.15$, SE $=.09$, CI [-.02, .31]). Higher relationship satisfaction also predicted higher subjective well-being for both men (time 1: $\.33$, SE $=.08$, CI [.18, .48]; time 2: $\.30$, SE $=.07$, CI [.17, .43]) and women (time 1: $\.31$, SE $=.07$, CI [.18, .45]; time 2: $\.36$, SE $=.08$, CI [.22, .51]).

As expected, Time 1 scores on each construct predicted scores on the same construct at Time 2 for both men and women, indicating some degree of stability in the constructs across time. More
Figure 4. Relations between Well-Being, Relationship Satisfaction, Goal Progress, and Goal Congruence Across Time.

specifically, Time 1 well-being scores predicted Time 2 well-being scores (men: .33, SE = .11, CI [.13, .54]; women: .54, SE = .08, CI [.39, .69]); Time 1 relationship satisfaction predicted Time 2 relationship satisfaction (men: .37, SE = .09, CI [.19, .56]; women: .62, SE = .08, CI [.46, .79]); Time 1 goal progress predicted Time 2 goal progress (men: .57, SE = .07, CI [.43, .71]; women: .54, SE = .07, CI [.41, .68]); and Time 1 goal congruence predicted Time 2 goal congruence (.67, SE = .07, CI [.53, .80]).

Contrary to expectations, Time 1 goal congruence did not predict changes in goal progress and relationship satisfaction for men and women (all ps > .05). I only found one relation across-time between constructs, which was that for men, being able to make goal progress at Time 1 predicted increases in their relationship satisfaction at Time 2 (.34, SE = .10, CI [.15, .53]). However, this same relation was not significant for women (-.08, SE = .11, CI [-.29, .13]) and was significantly different from the relation found for men (i.e., the confidence intervals of the path estimates do not overlap).
At Time 1, I also found residual correlations between constructs for men and women. More specifically, men’s well-being was correlated with women’s well-being (.23, SE = .07, CI [.09, .37]) and men’s relationship satisfaction was correlated with women’s relationship satisfaction (.28, SE = .08, CI [.12, .44]). Furthermore, for both men and women, their own relationship satisfaction was correlated with their own goal progress (men: .25, SE = .08, CI [.10, .40]; women: .26, SE = .08, CI [.11, .41]). These same relations were not found at Time 2, while controlling for these associations at Time 1.

### 3.3.2.3 Discussion of Longitudinal Results

In sum, the results of the longitudinal analysis showed that the same pattern of relations was found between the variables concurrently at both Time 1 and Time 2. More specifically, at both time points higher goal congruence was associated with higher relationship satisfaction and greater goal progress, which were both associated with higher subjective well-being. Also, scores on each construct at Time 1 predicted scores on the construct at Time 2, which indicates stability over time in each construct. The stability coefficients ranged from .33 to .67, indicating that although there is some stability over time, there is also change in these constructs across a 3-month time period. It is important to keep in mind that real stability is somewhat higher than the
coefficients indicate because these estimates have not been corrected for lack of reliability in the measurement of each construct, given that a path analysis was used instead of a latent-variable model.

Contrary to my expectations, once I controlled for stability over time and concurrent relations between the variables, Time 1 goal congruence was unrelated to changes in relationship satisfaction and goal progress. This was a rather stringent rest of the hypothesis, but more importantly, if goal congruence also changes over time, then Time 1 measures of goal congruence may not be predictive of Time 2 scores because the construct itself is also changing across time. Based on the stability coefficient of goal congruence (.67), it does appear to be the case that there are some changes in goal congruence over time despite considerable stability. I examine changes in goal pursuit over time next, which may yield insights into possible changes in goal congruence over time.

3.3.3 Adapting to Incongruence

3.3.3.1 Adjusting Goal Pursuit

I also wanted to examine how people adapt to goal incongruence over time as their relationships develop. More specifically, I wanted to examine whether people are more likely to stop pursuing goals that conflict with the goals of their partner and also whether goals that conflict with the goals of the partner become less important over time. In order to examine this issue, I focused on ratings provided by the participants for each of the goals they listed and their ratings of these same goals again at Session 2.

I used the software HLM (Raudenbush et al., 2004) to conduct the analyses in order to control for lack of independence in the data. A 3-level model was used given that goals are nested within persons, who are nested within dyads. In these analyses, the intercepts and the slopes were fixed and random variation around the intercept was allowed. The predictor variables were group-mean centered, which eliminates the effects of individual differences on the results. In each analysis, the Time 2 measure of the construct of interest was the outcome and, where appropriate, the Time 1 measure of the same construct was included as a control. By including the Time 1 measure as a control, the effects reflect changes in the construct over time based on
the level of goal conflict. In each analysis, the predictor variable was the level of conflict with the goals of the partner regarding the given goal.

In the first analysis, I tested whether goal conflict at Time 1 predicts if people are still likely to pursue the given goal three months later. This analysis was conducted with the outcome identified as a Bernoulli trial because there were only two categorical responses possible (yes = 1, no = 0). In this analysis, I used goal conflict at Time 1 to predict whether the goal was still pursued at Time 2. The results indicated that the more conflict people reported at Time 1, the less likely they were to still pursue the goal at Time 2 (B = -.61, SE = .29, odds that goal is still pursued: .54, 95% CI [.31, .96]). Given that goal conflict at Time 1 was a significant predictor of discontinued goal pursuit, I examined whether gender, relationship satisfaction, or overall levels of goal conflict moderate this effect. None of these variables were significant moderators of the effect of goal conflict on continued goal pursuit.

Next, I wanted to examine whether goal conflict predicts changes in goal commitment over the three-month period. In this analysis, I included Time 1 goal commitment as a predictor to allow me to examine changes in goal commitment over time. As expected, Time 1 goal commitment was a significant predictor of Time 2 goal commitment (B = .55, SE = .06, p < .001). However, contrary to predictions, Time 1 goal conflict did not predict changes in goal commitment over time (B = -.04, SE = .09, p = .68). (Concurrently, Time 1 goal conflict was also unrelated to Time 1 goal commitment; B = .02, SE = .06, p = .78.)

I also examined whether goal conflict predicts changes in goal importance over time. In this analysis I included Time 1 goal importance, which was a significant predictor of Time 2 goal importance (B = .49, SE = .06, p < .001). Here, I found that Time 1 goal conflict predicted changes in goal importance, such that the higher the reported conflict at the beginning of the study, the less important the goal became over time (B = -.16, SE = .08, p = .049). (Concurrently, Time 1 goal conflict was unrelated to Time 1 goal importance, B = .04, SE = .07, p = .54.) Given that goal conflict was a significant predictor, I examined whether gender, relationship satisfaction, or overall levels of goal conflict moderate this effect. None of these variables were significant moderators of the effect of goal conflict on changes in goal importance.
3.3.3.2 Relation of Goal Pursuit Adjustment to Relationship Satisfaction and Well-Being

In the next set of analyses, I tested whether the tendency to adjust the importance of goals that conflict with the goals of the partner are associated with changes in relationship satisfaction, commitment, and well-being over time. To conduct this analysis, for each individual I selected the goals that created at least some amount of conflict with the goals of the partner at Time 1 (i.e., an average rating of goal conflict of at least 2 on a 5-point scale across the two items assessing goal conflict). I then created an index for each individual to assess the degree to which they changed the importance of these conflicting goals on average by Time 2. I did this by subtracting Time 2 goal importance ratings from the importance ratings at Time 1 for each individual goal that created at least some conflict at Time 1, then averaged these difference scores across the goals ($M = .17, SD = 1.12$). Higher scores indicated greater devaluing of the goal over time. I then used this goal adjustment score to predict changes in the variables of interest over time (i.e., Time 1 measures of the variables were included as controls in the model). I also calculated a score to index change in goal commitment and repeated the analyses using these scores. To conduct these analyses a 2-level model was used (i.e., individuals nested in dyads) where intercepts were fixed with random variation and estimated slopes were fixed. Predictor variables were grand-mean centered.

First, I examined whether greater devaluing of conflicting goals over time predicted changes in relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. The results showed that Time 1 relationship satisfaction predicted Time 2 satisfaction ($B = .51, SE = .10, p < .001$), but changes in goal importance did not predict changes in relationship satisfaction over time ($B = -.04, SE = .08, p > .05$). Similarly, Time 1 relationship commitment predicted Time 2 relationship commitment ($B = .79, SE = .09, p < .001$), however, changes in goal importance predicted changes in relationship commitment ($B = .20, SE = .09, p = .031$). The more people devalued their conflicting goals over time, the more committed they became to their relationship. I found the same results using changes in goal commitment ($B = .24, SE = .09, p = .014$), such that greater changes in goal commitment over time predicted increases in relationship commitment.

I also examined whether changes in goal importance predict changes in well-being. Time 1 life satisfaction predicted Time 2 life satisfaction ($B = .73, SE = .10, p < .001$), but changes in goal importance did not predict changes in life satisfaction ($B = -.01, SE = .10, p > .05$). Similarly,
Time 1 positive affect predicted Time 2 positive affect ($B = .43, SE = .12, p = .001$), but goal importance change did not predict changes in positive affect ($B = -.13, SE = .09, p > .05$). Time 1 negative affect predicted Time 2 negative affect ($B = .41, SE = .13, p = .003$), but goal importance change again did not predict changes in negative affect ($B = .02, SE = .10, p > .05$). The results were the same using scores indexing changes in goal commitment (all $ps > .05$).

3.3.3.3 Discussion of Analysis of Adapting to Goal Incongruence

In this section, I examined whether goal pursuit changes over time based on the level of goal conflict reported over the particular goal. My results showed that conflict over specific goals has important implications for goal pursuit. More specifically, people were less likely to continue pursuing a goal that conflicted with the goals of their partner and they also devalued the goal over time, such that the goal became less important to them three months later. These findings indicate that goal conflict seems to exert influence over the goals relationship partners pursue and that they make adjustments to their goals as their relationships progress. Furthermore, these goal adjustment processes are linked to increasing relationship commitment over time. People who were more likely to devalue the goals that conflicted with the goals of their partner reported increases in their levels of commitment to their relationship over the three-month period.

3.4 Summary

In sum, in this longitudinal study of newly dating romantic couples, I found that goal congruence was associated with greater goal progress and greater relationship satisfaction at both Time 1 and Time 2. Furthermore, as expected, both goal progress and relationship satisfaction were, in turn, associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Contrary to expectations, goal congruence did not predict changes in goal progress and relationship satisfaction over time, once all of the concurrent relations between the variables and stability in the variables over time were accounted for. The only significant change across time was that for men, the more goal progress they were able to make at Time 1, the more satisfied they became with their relationship by Time 2. The same relation was not significant for women, although the confidence intervals of the estimates for men and women were close to overlapping, which indicates that this may not be reliable gender difference. In future research, it will be important to try to replicate these findings with larger samples where there is greater power to detect and replicate any possible gender differences.
Although goal congruence early on in the relationship did not predict changes in relationship satisfaction and goal progress over time, these results are not surprising if the partners actively try to adjust their goals to the goals of their partner in order to reduce goal conflict in the relationship. If people adjust the pursuit of their goals, then goal congruence also changes over time. Indeed, when I examined adjustments to goal incongruence, I found that the more a goal conflicted with the goals of the partner early on in the relationship, the less likely people were to still pursue the goal at Time 2 and the more they devalued the goal over time. Importantly, these adjustments to goal pursuit were associated with increases in relationship commitment over time. The more likely people were to stop pursuing a goal or to devalue a goal that conflicted with their partner’s goals, the more committed they became to their relationship over time. These results indicate that people do adjust their goals to try to make them more congruent with their goals of their partner, which is also coupled with increasing commitment to the relationship as the partners get to know one another better and their relationship progresses to a more committed and serious level. The results of this study and the implications of these findings will be discussed in more detail next, in the general discussion section.
4 General Discussion

4.1 Summary of Main Findings

I conducted two studies, a daily diary study of dating couples and a longitudinal study of newly dating couples. In the daily diary study, the main results concerned the accuracy of people’s perceptions of whether an activity is meeting the goals of their partner and the short-term longitudinal changes in relationship quality and well-being. More specifically, I found that people’s perceptions of whether their partner’s goals are being met reflect some degree of accuracy as well as some degree of error, and that high levels of goal congruence predicted increases in well-being and relationship quality over a 1-month time period. In the longitudinal study, the main results concerned the concurrent relations between goal congruence, goal progress, relationship satisfaction, and well-being, and the adjustments people made to their goal pursuits. More specifically, at both time points higher goal congruence predicted greater goal progress and higher relationship quality, both of which in turn predicted higher subjective well-being. The findings also indicated that goal congruence did not predict changes in goal progress and relationship quality over time, most likely because partners’ levels of goal congruence changed over time. As relationships progressed, partners stopped pursuing and devalued conflicting goals over time, which was associated with increases in relationship commitment.

In addition to these main results, some of my hypotheses could not be properly tested due to some problems with study design that were not anticipated. These problems are important because they have implications for future research in this area, as they reveal important insights into the activities of dating couples and the challenges that their activities present in studying goal pursuit in a relationship context. In the following sections, the main findings of the studies are discussed in greater detail, then the limitations of the studies are discussed along with potential solutions to the problems that emerged. These are followed by a synthesis of the findings and their implications for future research on goal pursuit in intimate relationships.
4.1.1 Accuracy of Goal Perceptions

The first notable finding that emerged was from the daily diary study, which was that people’s reports of whether an activity was meeting their goals only correlated about .40 with their partner’s perceptions of whether their goals were being met. The size of this correlation indicates some accuracy in people’s perceptions of their partner’s goals. The level of agreement between the partners is similar to the level of agreement commonly found for well-being constructs, such as life satisfaction (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009). As goals were measured with a single item, some of the disagreement between partners is likely due to random measurement error. However, the modest correlations also suggest that there is a considerable degree of error in people’s perceptions of whether a partner’s goals are being met or not in joint activities.

It is worth noting that in most of the couples’ activities, the goals of both partners were being met, and that most of the inaccurate perceptions emerged when the partners’ joint activity did not meet the goals of one of the partners. In these types of activities, it was difficult for the other partner to see that the goals of their partner are not being met. It is interesting to see such high levels of inaccuracy in people’s perceptions regarding the goals of their romantic partner and raises the question of why it might be the case that people cannot perceive their partner’s goals with high levels of accuracy. In future research it will be important to examine whether there are individual differences in accuracy and what factors may make it easier for people to be more accurate in their perceptions. For example, it is possible that when people take part in an activity with their partner that is not meeting their own goals, they may not want their partner to know that their goals are not being met. Thus, in some cases, people may actively try to conceal that the activity is not meeting their goals in order to avoid detracting from their partner’s enjoyment of the activity. For example, Peter may take Anna to see a movie that she is really excited about, even though he is not interested in the movie. Sometimes when an activity is not meeting their goals, people may still be having a good time and enjoy the activity. For example, Peter may find that the movie was not so bad after all and he ends up enjoying it. When people try to conceal that their goals are not being met and when they end up enjoying the activity, it may be very hard for their partner to know that their goals are not being met. On the other hand, it is possible that on some occasions, people make it clear to their partner that their goals are not being met, particularly when they are not enjoying the activity. For example, when John accompanies Mary to a dinner with her work colleagues that he did not want to go to, he may not make any effort to
have a good time and does not conceal that he did not want to be at the dinner. In such cases, people are probably quite accurate at determining that their partner’s goals are not being met.

People’s motivation for engaging in activities that do not meet their own goals may be important to consider when trying to understand the accuracy of their partner’s perceptions. Perhaps when people have approach motivated reasons to give up their own goals for the sake of the partner, such as making their partner happy (Gable, 2006; Gable & Strachman, 2008), it may be hard for their partner to accurately perceive that their goals are not being met because they may be trying please their partner and not ruin the experience of the activity for their partner. Indeed, prior research shows that people who sacrifice for their partners due to approach motivated reasons experience more positive emotions (Impett et al., 2005; Impett & Gordon, 2008) and the expression of these positive emotions may make it hard for their partner to perceive that their goals are not being met in the activity. In contrast, when people have avoidance motivated reasons to give up their own goals for the sake of their partner, such as trying to avoid their partner getting angry at them (Gable, 2006; Gable & Strachman, 2008), it may be easier for their partner to see that they are not getting much out of the activity. Avoidance motivated sacrifice has been associated with higher negative emotions (Impett et al., 2005; Impett & Gordon, 2008) and when people experience negative emotions, it may be easy for their partner to see that their goals are not being met, especially when they are not trying to conceal their emotional experiences from their partner.

In future research, it will be important to examine goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities in more detail with regards to the accuracy of people’s perceptions of their partner’s goals. In particular, people’s motivations for engaging in joint activities with their partner, and their own and their partner’s emotional experiences may be important factors that influence accuracy. It is also possible that some people have strong biases in their perceptions of their partner’s goals, which may have serious implications for the quality of their relationships over time. For example, if Peter feels that he often gives up the pursuit of his own goals in order to make Anna happy, but she fails to perceive that his goals are often being sacrificed to benefit her because she believes that Peter’s goals are also being satisfied, she may show no appreciation of Peter’s willingness to sacrifice his goals for her. Over time, Peter may begin to feel that his needs are not being met and that Anna shows no understanding and appreciation of his kindness towards her, leading to resentment and dissatisfaction with the relationship. Thus, perceptions of inaccuracy –
or accuracy – although at times harmless and inconsequential, may also have serious consequences for the relationship if perceptions are severely out of touch with reality.

4.1.2 Concurrent Associations between Goal Congruence and Well-Being

Prior research has shown that intimate relationships influence how people pursue their goals and the amount of progress they are able to make (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Research on goal congruence has shown that people feel closer to their partner and enjoy higher affective well-being in goal-congruent activities (Gere et al., 2011), and that the overall level of goal conflict between relationship partners is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and lower subjective well-being (Gere & Schimmack, in press). In the longitudinal study, I was also able to show that higher goal conflict between the partners is associated with lower subjective well-being and lower relationship satisfaction. However, the longitudinal study extends existing work in several ways. First, I modeled goal conflict as a dyadic variable. In prior studies, goal conflict was based on partners’ individual reports, but in this study I used the ratings of both men and women in the relationship to create a latent construct of goal conflict. This way the latent variable represented the level of goal conflict that both partners agree occurs in their relationship. The advantage of modeling goal conflict this way is that the results reflect more than just individual biases and the observed associations are not due solely to self-report biases.

Second, I examined whether goal progress mediates the relationship between goal conflict and well-being. Gere and Schimmack (in press) suggested that the reason why relationship quality did not fully mediate the relation between goal conflict and well-being in their own work is because goal conflict may also influence the amount of goal progress each partner is able to make. Goal progress has been shown to be strongly associated with subjective well-being (e.g., Emmons, 1999; King, 2008); thus, goal progress may explain the relation between goal conflict and well-being that remains when relationship quality is accounted for. In this longitudinal study, I measured people’s satisfaction with goal progress to directly test this idea, and found that indeed, once I controlled for both relationship satisfaction and goal progress, there was no remaining direct relation between goal conflict and well-being. These results indicate that goal conflict between relationship partners influences well-being indirectly, by leading to less goal progress and lower relationship quality.
There may be several reasons why goal conflict results in less goal progress. When a goal is incongruent with the goals of the relationship partner, people may limit their pursuit of the goals that lead to conflict to occasions when the partner is not present. It is also possible that people re-evaluate conflicting goals. Past research on intrapersonal goal conflict has shown that people feel ambivalent towards goals that create conflict (Emmons & King, 1988). Ambivalence toward conflicting goals results in people thinking about these goals more frequently than they think about other goals, and at the same time, people also engage in fewer activities that would result in making progress toward these goals (Emmons & King, 1988). Thus, it is possible that when people’s goals conflict with the goals of their romantic partner, they start to feel ambivalent about the conflicting goals, which could result in increased rumination and decreased action. Both of these consequences result in decreases in well-being over time. In future research, it would be interesting to explore whether higher goal incongruence is associated with less goal progress concurrently due to partners engaging in fewer activities that would promote goal progress as a result of ambivalence toward goals that create goal conflict.

In contrast to the link between goal conflict and goal progress, it is less clear how goal conflict influences the quality of an intimate relationship. In future research, it will be important to investigate the processes that may be at play to link greater goal conflict to lower relationship satisfaction. For example, it is possible that partners who have more conflicting goals get into arguments more frequently or have to make greater sacrifices and do so more frequently than partners whose goals are more congruent. Although the willingness to give up one’s own interests for the sake of the partner has been linked to higher relationship quality (Van Lange et al., 1997), it is possible that actually having to sacrifice one’s own goals for the sake of a relationship may not have positive consequences, especially if it occurs frequently. Partners with highly incongruent goals may be forced to choose between their relationship and their own goal progress on a regular basis (Gere et al., 2011; Gere & Schimmack, in press). While choosing to pursue their own goals may result in conflict and arguments with the partner, choosing to give up their goals may result in not having their own needs met, neither of which is beneficial for their long-term well-being (Impett & Gordon, 2008; Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). Future research should explore these possibilities and other ways in which goal conflict may lead to lower quality relationships.
4.1.3 Changes in Relationships and Well-Being over Time

Finally, I also examined longitudinal changes in well-being, goal pursuit, and relationship quality based on partners’ goal congruence in both the daily diary and the longitudinal studies. Although goal congruence has been shown to be associated with well-being and relationship quality concurrently (Gere & Schimmack, in press), it has not been examined yet whether goal congruence is associated with changes in these variables and in goal pursuit over time. I examined longitudinal relations in both studies because the studies involved different samples of dating partners and I explored slightly different research questions in the two samples. In the longitudinal study, the sample consisted of dating partners whose relationships were relatively new (3 months on average). These partners were just getting to know one another better and learning about each other’s goals. In contrast, the daily diary study involved dating partners whose relationships were well-established (dating for 17 months on average). These partners knew each other relatively well and likely had a good understanding of each other’s goals. Thus, goal incongruence in these different types of relationships may mean different things. For newly dating couples emerging goal incongruence may reflect problems to be resolved or a reason to terminate a new relationship with a partner who appears to be incompatible. For more established couples, goal incongruence may reflect conflict over goals that the partners have not been able to resolve as their relationships progressed over time (Gere & Schimmack, in press). As such, goal incongruence may represent a more serious problem in more established relationships and have more severe consequences.

With the sample of newly dating couples, I examined whether goal incongruence early on in the relationship is associated with decreases in goal progress and relationship quality over time. The results showed that goal conflict did not predict changes in these variables; however, the level of congruence between the goals of partners changed over time. My analysis of individual goals that created conflict in the relationship indicated that partners attempted to adjust their goals to the goals of their partner in order to reduce goal conflict. More specifically, the results showed that when individuals reported that the pursuit of a particular goal conflicted with the goals of their partner, they were more likely to stop pursuing or devalue the goal over time. These results suggest that many people made an active effort to reduce goal conflict between themselves and their partner as the relationship developed. Not surprisingly, the more people adjusted their goal pursuits over time, the more committed they became to their relationship. This is important
because some existing experimental work suggests that people feel closer to those who are instrumental to their goal pursuits and that feelings of closeness toward others shift based on goal instrumentality (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). My results suggest that this relation also occurs in the opposite direction: that people’s feelings of closeness to others may shift their priorities and the goals that they pursue.

In future research on newly dating partners, it will be important to examine the process of shifting priorities more closely. Some people may be more willing to shift their priorities for the sake of a relationship than others. For example, people high in agreeableness may be more willing to accommodate their partner’s goals for the sake of the relationship. Furthermore, the shifting of priorities in response to goal conflict may have positive consequences for some people more than for others. For example, changing of goals for those who are low in communal orientation may be experienced quite negatively, whereas for those high in communal orientation such adjustments may be experienced more positively given their genuine desire to benefit their partner. Indeed, some recent work suggests that communally oriented people experience making a sacrifice for their partner more positively than people low in communal orientation, experiencing feelings of greater authenticity and higher positive affect (Kogan et al., 2010). The consequences of adjusting goals may also depend on the characteristics of the goals that are dropped or devalued. For example, the importance of the goal to the person’s identity may influence whether shifting priorities for the sake of a relationship has positive or negative long-term consequences. It is likely that adjusting goal pursuits for the sake of a relationship will only have positive consequences if people still feel that their needs are being met in the relationship and they are able to move toward important goals in their lives.

In contrast to the sample of new couples, in the sample of the more established dating couples, higher levels of goal incongruence predicted decreases in both relationship quality and subjective well-being over time. More specifically, higher goal incongruence predicted decreases in life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment over time, and increases in negative emotions over time. These findings indicate that it is possible that higher goal conflict for more established couples represents more enduring goal conflict that the couple has not been able to resolve during the course of their relationship (Gere & Schimmack, in press). The existence of unresolved goal conflict, in turn, leads to decreases in the quality of the relationship over time and in subjective well-being. Given that these changes occurred over a short, one-
month period, the results suggest that goal congruence may indeed play an important role in romantic relationships. Thus, it may very well be the case that for partners who have more congruent goals it is easier to establish more satisfying relationships, make more progress toward their goals, and as a result, enjoy higher levels of personal well-being.

4.2 Study Limitations and Unexpected Findings

Although the main results of these studies were promising, some unexpected results and methodological limitations also emerged. First, in the daily diary study, I wanted to replicate the concurrent relations between goal congruence, relationship quality, and subjective well-being that has been found in prior research (Gere & Schimmack, in press), and also examine short-term longitudinal changes. I used two different measures of goal congruence in the study. One measure was obtained by asking people to list six goals that they pursue and for each goal rate how much goal conflict they experience with their partner when they try to pursue the given goal. These ratings were averaged across the six goals to provide a measure of goal conflict. The other measure I used was a measure of perceived goal congruence, which was based on participants’ ratings of how congruent each of their six goals was with the six goals they indicated that their partner is pursuing. These ratings of goal congruence were averaged for a measure of overall goal congruence. Surprisingly, the goal conflict measure was not associated with any of the well-being and relationship quality measures concurrently but the goal congruence measure was associated with all well-being measures and with relationship satisfaction (it was not significantly associated with relationship commitment). These findings were unexpected because such concurrent associations have been found in prior research (Gere & Schimmack, in press) and were also found in the longitudinal study. It is unclear why concurrent associations did not emerge for the goal conflict but they emerged for the goal congruence measure. One possibility may be the small sample size, which resulted in low statistical power to detect existing effects, especially if these effects are small to moderate in size. Indeed, although none of the effects of goal conflict were significant, they were all in the right direction and ranged from .15 to .33 (with the exception of the effects on negative affect, which was .05). With a larger sample, these effects may have reached statistical significance. It is possible that the effects associated with the goal congruence measure are stronger because for that measure the participants are asked to rate the effects of each pair of their own and their partner’s goals on the relationship directly, whereas for the goal conflict measure they only rate
the degree of goal conflict for each goal in general. Thus, asking about effects on the relationship directly may result in stronger effects that can be detected even in smaller samples. However, the differences between these measures should be examined in greater detail in order to get a sense of what information people are relying on when making their ratings on both measures and which measure may be a more accurate reflection of the amount of goal conflict between the partners.

Second, in the longitudinal study, I tested longitudinal relations between goal conflict, relationship satisfaction, and goal progress. I expected to find that people who have greater goal conflict earlier on in their relationship would experience declines in their relationship satisfaction and would find it more difficult to make progress toward their goals. However, after accounting for stability over time and concurrent relations between the variables, goal conflict did not predict changes in goal progress and relationship satisfaction over time. It is worth noting that the sample size was relatively small in this study too, which decreased statistical power to detect longitudinal effects. My test of the longitudinal relations was also quite stringent, given that I tested for longitudinal changes while controlling for stability over time and concurrent relations at both time points. More importantly, it is also possible that many people who had incongruent goals at the beginning of their relationships either attempted to make adjustments to their goals to accommodate their relationships or ended their relationships by the second session of the study. If the variable of goal congruence itself changes over time because people attempt to adjust their goals to lower goal conflict in their relationships, then my test of the longitudinal effects would not yield evidence of changes but would only show concurrent relations between goal congruence, relationship quality, and goal progress. This is because any changes in goal congruence from Time 1 to Time 2 assessments would be represented as unique variance in scores of goal congruence at Time 2. Thus, Time 2 relationship satisfaction and goal progress would be associated with Time 2 goal congruence more strongly than with any unique variance in Time 1 goal congruence scores (which would – in part – represent the goal conflict that was eliminated over time by making adjustments to pursued goals).

The pattern of results in the longitudinal study corresponds to the idea of changes in goal congruence over time, which may therefore explain why these longitudinal relations were not found. First, goal congruence was associated with goal progress and relationship satisfaction at both time points but not longitudinally. Second, given that the sample consisted of couples who
had been dating for less than four months when they began the study, it is very likely that they attempted to change their goal pursuits over time. Indeed, stability correlations were in the .30 to .60 range for the constructs, indicating that there were some changes over time. Third, my analysis of incongruent goals indicated that people did attempt to reduce goal conflict over time by dropping and devaluing goals that conflicted with their partners’ goals. In other words, when partners had incongruent goals they attempted to adjust their goals to try to make the relationship work. The difference between the couples who ended their relationships by the second session of the study and those who did not may not be differences in initial levels of goal conflict, but rather in their willingness or ability to resolve the existing incongruence for the sake of the relationship.

Finally, in addition to the unexpected findings, I also ran into unanticipated problems with the data based on the methodology I used. As a result of these methodological problems, I was unable to properly test two of my hypotheses. One of these hypotheses was the prediction that partners who have more congruent goals would participate in goal-congruent activities more frequently during the daily diary period. The other hypothesis was that partners would experience greater positive emotions, relationship satisfaction, and commitment, and lower negative emotions during goal-congruent activities. Related to this last hypothesis, I also wanted to examine whether perceived goal congruence is more important than actual congruence, which I was also unable to test. The main problem that prevented me from being able to examine these research questions stemmed from the fact that the majority of the couples’ activities met the goals of both partners, in combination with that the partners provided reports on only ten of their joint activities. This created lack of variance in the predictor variables, substantially reducing any statistical power to detect significant effects that may exist.

It is possible that the majority of the activities couples reported on met the goals of both partners because they were asked to report on either the first or the last activity on a day they spent time together and that these activities are not a representative sample of couples’ activities. Maybe couples try to do things to begin and end off their time together by doing something that is satisfying for both partners, resulting in a disproportionate number of activities that met the goals of both partners. However, another possibility is that dating couples do spend the majority of their time together in goal-congruent activities. Regardless of why most activities in my study were goal-congruent, one solution to this problem could be to obtain more extensive reports from
couples on their joint activities to ensure that there are a broad range of activities represented, both goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities, for analysis. A larger sample of activities may be especially important when studying dating couples, who may be spending most of their time together in leisure activities where they are able to choose activities that meet the needs of both partners. Whereas dating partners may take part in activities that their partner is not interested in alone or with others, married couples may have less freedom to choose their joint activities and engage in goal-incongruent activities with greater frequency. Indeed, in the study by Gere et al. (2011), married couples reported that their activities were goal-congruent only about 50% of the time, in contrast to the 71% of activities in this study with dating couples. This may explain why Gere et al. (2011) were able to demonstrate the effects of goal congruence on affective well-being.

In future work, it will be important to try to obtain a more diverse sample of activities from couples and reports on a larger number of activities. One way to get a large sample of activities is through the use of an experience sampling methodology (ESM). In ESM, people carry palm pilots (or similar electronic devices) on which they are paged multiple times each day and each time they are paged, they report on their current, ongoing activities (Schimmack & Diener, 2003; Scollon, Kim-Prieto, & Diener, 2003). They can carry the palm pilots for a few days or for up to a few weeks at a time, which allows researchers to sample a wide range of activities that are representative of people’s usual, daily activities (Christensen, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau, Lebo, & Kaschub, 2003; Scollon et al., 2003). A further advantage of ESM is that people report on their activities as they occur, eliminating the problem of memory biases in retrospective reports (Schimmack & Diener, 2003; Scollon et al., 2003). Another methodology that could be used to obtain a more diverse sample of activities is the daily reconstruction method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). In this methodology, both partners would list all of their joint activities that day and would then answer questions regarding their emotions and feelings toward their partner and relationship during each activity. Once again, couples could complete these daily reports for several weeks in order to provide a representative set of activities that they regularly engage in. Both of these methodologies would eliminate the problems that I ran into with this daily diary design and would thus allow testing my hypotheses of whether goal congruence is associated with the proportion of goal-congruent activities and
whether people’s experiences of joint activities differ based on actual or perceived goal congruence.

In future work, in addition to using a better methodology, it will also be important to examine how married or cohabiting couples may differ from dating couples. The current study seems to be in line with the assumption that dating couples have more freedom to choose their joint activities and thus choose goal-congruent activities more frequently than married couples may do so. These findings will be important replicate with a more representative sample of activities from dating couples. If such differences are real, then it is also possible that married and dating couples experience goal-incongruent activities differently. For example, the less often partners take part in goal-incongruent activities, the less unpleasant such activities may be experienced when they do take place. If Peter’s and Anna’s goals are highly congruent and they rarely engage in activities that meet the goals of only one of the partners, then when Anna has to go along for a visit to Peter’s family, Anna may experience the activity less negatively, given that it occurs so infrequently, compared to if she had to regularly do things that met only Peter’s goals. In future research it will be important to try to gain greater understanding of partners’ experiences of their joint activities.

4.3 Conclusions

Researchers have become increasingly interested in the interplay between goal pursuit and social relationships, which is reflected in the growing number of studies that examine the influence of relationships on goal pursuit and vice versa (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Congruence between the goals of relationship partners is one factor that represents that interplay because goal congruence is associated with both relationship quality and with goal progress (Gere et al., 2011; Gere & Schimmack, in press). In my dissertation, I conducted two studies with the primary goal of increasing understanding of the role of goal congruence in relationships. The results of the two studies have provided insight into many aspects of goal congruence.

First, prior studies of relationship partners’ joint activities have only examined goal congruence from the perspective of one of the partners (e.g., Gere et al., 2011). Given that only one person’s view of each activity was solicited, it was not known whether people can accurately report on whether their activity is meeting the goals of their partner or not. In my daily diary study, I found that people are moderately accurate in their perceptions of their relationship partner’s goals.
Although most activities that couples reported on in the study were activities that met the goals of both partners, people were quite inaccurate in identifying when their partner’s goals were not being met. These results suggest that the perception of goal congruence in an activity may at times be illusory rather than real. These findings raise questions about possible consequences of being able to accurately perceive a partner’s goals. For example, is it beneficial to hold positive illusions and believe that one’s partner’s goals are being met? Or is it better to be accurate and know when one’s partner is unable to meet his or her own goals during a joint activity? The answers to these questions would yield important insight into relationship processes.

It is also important to understand why people may be inaccurate in their perceptions of their partner’s goals. Do some people actively try to conceal that their goals are not being met? Is it beneficial to conceal that goal progress is not possible? It is likely that there might be specific circumstances under which it may be beneficial for people to try to conceal that their goals are not being met in order to benefit the relationship. For example, when accompanying a partner to his or her family gathering, it may be beneficial to try to make the best of the situation instead of conveying one’s displeasure. Also, how do people try to determine whether their partner’s goals are being met? There might be some consistent cues in people’s behaviour that their partners use to try to determine whether their goals are being met. For example, people may assume that if they see their partner enjoying an activity, their goals are being met. However, enjoyment may not necessarily always signal that goals are being met. In order to understand how healthy relationships function and when it may be beneficial to prioritize a relationship or one’s own goal pursuit, it is important to try to answer these questions.

Second, prior studies have only looked at emotional experiences in goal-congruent and goal-incongruent activities (Gere et al., 2011), and concurrent relations between goal congruence, relationship quality, and well-being (Gere & Schimmack, in press). In my studies, I found that goal progress mediates the relation between goal congruence and subjective well-being, such that higher goal congruence predicts greater goal progress, which in turn predicts higher well-being. This is similar to the findings with regards to relationship quality, which also functions as a mediator (Gere & Schimmack, in press), a result that I also replicated in my studies. Furthermore, I examined people’s goal pursuits and relationships longitudinally to get a better sense of how these constructs change over time. The results of the longitudinal analysis indicated that as relationship partners get to know one another, many attempt to adjust their goal pursuits.
in the face of goal conflict. More specifically, people stop pursuing and devalue goals that conflict with the goals of their relationship partner over time in order to try to reduce goal conflict in the relationship. These adjustments were also linked with relationship outcomes. Those who made greater adjustments to their goal pursuits by devaluing conflicting goals reported increasing commitment to their relationships over time. Thus, in new relationships, people are mindful of conflicting goals and try to make the relationship work by reducing existing goal conflict.

In relationships where the partners have been dating for a much longer time, although the partners still probably try to accommodate their partners, the degree of goal conflict that is present in the relationship – that they have perhaps been unable to resolve over time – predicted goal conflict during a 2-3 week daily-diary period and declines in relationship commitment and satisfaction over time. Furthermore, goal conflict for these more established dating couples also predicted important well-being variables: decreases in life satisfaction and increases in negative affect. These results suggest that enduring goal conflict is not just concurrently associated with relationship quality and subjective well-being, but that it is also associated with changes over time.

Thus, these studies have yielded important insights into how goal congruence functions in relationships and some of the strategies people use to try to eliminate goal conflict. The emerging picture of goal conflict from existing studies is quite complex, indicating that goal congruence is a dynamic construct, especially at the beginning of a relationship when people may attempt to make considerable adjustments to their goals as their relationships develop and they get to know their partners. At the same time, goal conflict is associated with less goal progress, lower relationship quality, and lower well-being concurrently in both new and long-term relationships. In more established relationships, when conflict between goals is not resolved successfully, the partners experience further declines in their relationship quality and well-being over time. The findings of these two studies have also revealed many unanswered questions that provide avenues for future research. Given the importance of goal congruence for well-being, it is important to gain a better understanding of how it influences goal pursuit and intimate relationships.
References


