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Compassionate and Self-Image Goals as Predictors for Problem Discussions in Romantic
Relationships

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Abstract

Romantic couples experience problem discussions as a part of daily life. This study examines how interpersonal goals (i.e., compassionate goals to support others and self-image goals to defend desired self-images; Crocker & Canevello, 2008) affect problem solving discussions. One hundred fifty-nine participants involved in romantic relationships completed online surveys, and of those, 67 couples completed lab experiments. In each couple, one person received a self-enhancement or self-transcendent values-affirmation manipulation. After the manipulation, couples discussed recent relationship problems. Results from the online survey revealed that participants with higher compassionate goals also reported higher non-zero sum beliefs, positive responses to conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern and trust. Participants with higher self-image goals showed opposite patterns of response. In lab experiments, the values-affirmation manipulations did not predict responses, but exploratory analyses revealed that pre-discussion interpersonal predicted post-discussion interpersonal goals, responses to conflict and conversation quality.

Compassionate and Self-Image Goals as Predictors for Problem Solving Discussions in Romantic Relationships

Disagreements, problems and other issues commonly arise when we share close relationships, and some people view problems differently than others. Even though it is generally widely accepted that “distress results from couples’ aversive and ineffectual response to conflict”, it is unclear what exactly determines whether or not responses are aversive (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Koerner & Jacobson, 1994).

Over the past 35 years, research has attempted to find theories and strategies to help inform couples and direct them through conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Marital conflict is associated with poorer mental, physical and family health, and more distressed couples show more negative and less positive comment exchanges, which in turn create cycles of negativity between relationship partners. However, in the long run, conflict has been shown to predict both weaker and stronger relationships. This may indicate that some conflicts can be constructive for long-term relationship health, while others can be destructive.

But what is it about some conflicts that make them constructive where other conflicts are destructive? It is possible that the topic of the conflict, the severity or the number of conflicts relate to the long-term outcome, but both correlational and experimental studies have also shown that people’s own cognitions and attributions can influence marital conflict behaviors or their responses to conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Nevertheless, research as a whole has lacked direction and comprehensive theory.

Fincham and Beach (1999) proposed that goals may affect responses to conflict in romantic relationships. They argued that a goal perspective, where a defensive goal system predicts negative conflict events, provides the missing comprehensive theory for understanding

marital relationships and conflicts in general. This goal perspective defines the difference between positive and negative long-term effects of conflict in romantic and marital relationships.

Interpersonal Goals

I suggest that people's interpersonal goals predict their defensive responses to conflict, and in turn affect their reactions to relationship conflict. This research focuses on two types of interpersonal goals: compassionate and self-image goals (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). I propose that goals play an important role in problem discussion navigation.

Compassionate goals. Compassionate goals focus on supporting others, not to obtain something for the self, but out of concerns for the well-being of others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). When people have compassionate goals, they want to be constructive forces in their relationships with others; they generally view their relationships as non-zero sum, indicating that they believe both people in a relationship can benefit simultaneously (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). They do not believe that positive outcomes for one person must come at the cost of the other person. Compassionate goals are positively correlated with self-compassion, as well as compassion for others, and clear, loving and connected feelings. As a result, compassionate goals should also be associated with high esteem for others. Similarly, because empathic concern is defined as having tender or concerned feelings for another person, people with compassionate goals should also have high empathic concern for others (Davis, 1983). Also, compassionate goals predict higher relationship closeness (Canevello & Crocker, 2008b), and lower relationship conflict (Crocker & Canevello, 2008), since people with compassionate goals have more open communication and generally discuss issues before they become conflicts. When people with compassionate goals do have conflicts, they try to be more understanding of

others' points of view and less defensive of their own out of respect for others (Burson, Canevello, & Crocker, 2008).

Moreover, compassionate goals predict positive intra- and interpersonal relationship processes over time (Canevello & Crocker, 2008b; Crocker & Canevello, 2008). For example, compassionate goals predict a positive responsiveness dynamic between people, which in turn improves both people's relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment. That is, when people have compassionate goals, they report increased responsiveness to relationship partners, which in turn leads them to perceive partners' increased responsiveness, which then leads to their own increased relationship quality. People's compassionate goals also have consequences for partners. When people have compassionate goals, they report increased responsiveness to partners, which leads to partners' increased perceptions of actors' responsiveness, which leads to partners' increased relationship quality.

Self-image goals. Self-image goals focus on constructing, maintaining, and defending desired public and private images of the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). When people have self-image goals, they care about what others think of them; however, they may not care about what others need. People with self-image goals generally view their relationships as zero-sum; they believe that benefits to one person often come at the cost of others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Self-image goals are also associated with higher self-preservation even at the cost of others, social anxiety, conflict, and loneliness. People with self-image goals often have less compassion for others; they are focused on themselves instead of others' needs. This should translate into decreased empathic concern and esteem for others. When people have self-image goals, they generally report increased conflict in their relationships. What's more, in their

conflicts, they show decreased understanding and increased defensive responses to conflict (Burson et al., 2008; Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

When people have self-image goals, their relationships suffer. Self-image goals predict negative intra- and interpersonal relationship processes over time (Canevello & Crocker, 2008b; Crocker & Canevello, 2008). For example, self-image goals predict a negative responsiveness dynamic between people, which in turn thwarts relationship development. That is, when people have self-image goals, they report decreased responsiveness to relationship partners, which in turn leads them to perceive partners' decreased responsiveness, which then leads to their own decreased relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment. People's self-image goals also have consequences for partners. When people have self-image goals, they report decreased responsiveness to partners, which leads to partners' decreased perceptions of actors' responsiveness, which leads to partners' decreased relationship quality.

Interpersonal Goals and Specific Interactions in Romantic Relationships

Although previous research has found consistent evidence of associations between interpersonal goals and relationship outcomes, these studies have focused on peer relationships. There is no theoretical reason why these associations should not apply to romantic relationships, but these associations have yet to be directly observed. Previous research also shows consistent interpersonal effects in self-reported daily and weekly experiences, but little research has examined how compassionate and self-image goals predict relationship outcomes after a single interaction. Examining a single interaction will provide insight into the temporal significance of interpersonal goals; while goals can fluctuate from instant to instant, it is currently unclear whether the effects of the goals need to build to produce effects, or if goals at any moment can influence interpersonal relationships. Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold: first, to

examine associations between interpersonal goals and relationship outcomes in romantic relationships, and second, to extend beyond previous research and test associations between compassionate and self-image goals and relationship outcomes in individual interactions. My hypotheses draw directly from previous research on compassionate and self-image goals.

Hypothesis set 1. First, I will examine associations between compassionate and self-image goals and relationship outcomes in a cross-sectional sample of people in romantic relationships. Consistent with previous research, I predict that when romantic relationship partners have compassionate goals for their relationships, they will report lower relationship conflict, higher nonzero-sum beliefs, and more understanding responses to conflict. They should also report higher esteem for and trust in their partners, and feel more empathic concern for partners. Additionally, I predict that when people have self-image goals, they will report higher zero-sum beliefs, higher conflict and defensive responses to conflict. They should also report lower partner-esteem, trust in partners, and empathic concern.

Hypothesis set 2. Second, I will test the causal association between interpersonal goals for romantic relationships and relationship outcomes after discussions of relationship problems. Based on previous research suggesting that compassionate goals are associated with understanding responses to conflict, I hypothesize that compassionate goals will cause actors to report more positive responses to conflict, defined by understanding and open-mindedness and higher conversation quality, defined by higher discussion satisfaction, problem resolution and discussion closure. Additionally, consistent with past research suggesting self-image goals are associated with defensive responses to conflict and a zero-sum perspective, I hypothesize that self-image goals will cause actors to report higher negative responses to conflict, defined by

defensiveness and closed-mindedness, and lower conversation quality, defined by lower discussion satisfaction, problem resolution and discussion closure.

Consistent with previous findings that one person's interpersonal goals predict relationship partner's experiences (Canevello & Crocker, 2008b; Crocker & Canevello, 2008), I also hypothesize that people's goals will predict their partners' reports of the discussion as well as their perceptions of their partners' goals for the discussion. Specifically, I predict that when actors have compassionate goals, actors will report higher perception of partners' compassionate goals, and partners' will experience more positive responses to conflict, defined by understanding and open-mindedness, and higher conversation quality, defined by higher discussion satisfaction, problem resolution and discussion closure. When actors have self-image goals, actors will report higher perception of partners' self image goals, and their partners will experience more negative responses to conflict, defined by defensiveness and closed-mindedness, and lower conversation quality, defined by lower discussion satisfaction, problem resolution and discussion closure.

This research has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it will help clarify the role of interpersonal goals in managing everyday relationship problems and issues. In a practical setting, this research may inform the clinical and counseling literature, including ways to improve how couples relate to one another when problems arise. This research has the potential to improve people's relationship quality, and, more broadly, their quality of life and general happiness, by encouraging individuals to adopt compassionate goals when approaching relationship difficulties.

Method

Participants

One hundred fifty-nine individuals in committed heterosexual romantic relationships of at least three months were recruited for a study on problem solving in romantic relationships. Half of participants were recruited via email advertisements to University of Michigan juniors and seniors who, with their partners, were offered entry into a drawing to win one to two \$50 gift certificates to a local restaurant in exchange for their time. The other half were recruited via the University of Michigan Introductory psychology courses in exchange for course credit. Partners of psychology students were also offered entry into the gift certificate drawing.

Of the full sample (49.1% women, 50.9% men), 1 (0.6%) reported her race as “American Indian or Alaska Native,” 2 (1.3%) reported their race as “Black or African American,” 19 (11.9%) reported their race as “Asian,” 131 (82.4%) reported their race as “Caucasian or White,” and 3 (1.9%) reported their race as “Other”. 3 participants (1.9%) elected not to provide race information. 8 participants (5.0%) described their ethnicity as “Hispanic or Latino(a)” of any race, 143 participants (89.9%) described their ethnicity as “not Hispanic or Latino(a),” and 8 participants (5.0%) did not provide ethnicity information. Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 34 (mean = 20.3, median = 20). Additionally, the length of time participants had been in their current romantic relationships ranged from 3 months to 66 months (5.5 years) with a mean of 19.5 months (1.6 years) and a median of 15 months (1.3 years). Lastly, partners had known one another for a range of 5 to 108 months (9 years) with a mean of 35.4 months (3.0 years) and a median of 26 months (2.2 years). All couples except one were involved in committed dating relationships; the remaining couple was married.

Procedure Overview

All 159 participants completed an online survey, and of those, 67 couples (134 participants) completed a lab experiment where one partner (i.e., the actor) received either a

manipulation designed to induce compassionate or self-image goals or a control task. The other partner (i.e., the partner) always completed the control task. After the manipulation, each couple discussed a recent relationship problem, and then answered questions about the discussion. The demographics of the 67 couples that completed the lab session did not differ significantly from the demographics of the 159 participants who completed the online portion only.

Procedure

This study consisted of two parts: an online session, followed by a lab session. In the online session, participants completed questionnaires assessing interpersonal goals, zero-sum beliefs, relationship conflict, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern, and relationship trust. Participants who completed both parts of the study completed the online pretest at least 24 hours before the lab session. In order to comply with course requirements, psychology students completed the pretest in groups of 1-10; all other participants completed the pretest on their own time.

Participants completed the lab session part of the study with their romantic partners. Participants completed short prelab questionnaires assessing interpersonal goals, and each participant wrote down a current problem or difficulty in their relationship. In each couple, one randomly chosen person was assigned to the experimental condition; this person was the “actor.” The other partner was assigned to the control condition; this person was the “partner.” The actor was then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a self-transcendent values-affirmation condition designed to evoke feelings associated with compassionate goals, a self-enhancement values-affirmation condition designed to evoke feelings associated with self-image goals, or a control condition.

In the self-transcendent condition, actors ranked a list of six self-transcendent value sets, including: “Compassion for the self and others / empathy,” “Supporting others / being responsive to the needs of others,” “Creating or contributing to something larger than yourself,” “Trust / openness / being vulnerable,” “Exploring others’ intentions / statements / values in order to better understand,” “Integrity / authenticity / honesty”. In the self-enhancement condition, actors ranked a list of six self-enhancement (self-directed) value sets, as follows: “Power and status,” “Wealth and possessions,” “Appearing confident and independent,” “Physical attractiveness,” “Popularity, admiration and prestige,” “Appearing intelligent and competent”. Next, the actors for both the self-transcendent and self-enhancement conditions wrote for 7 minutes about why their most important values were important and meaningful to them. Participants in the control condition (actors in the control condition and all partners) wrote for 7 minutes about a typical day in everyday life, including the important details of all of their daily routines. Participants in all conditions were encouraged to continue thinking and writing for the entire 7 minutes.

The values-affirmation manipulations used here have been shown to induce states associated with compassionate and self-image goals (Canevello & Crocker, 2008a; Burson, Mischowski, Crocker & Canevello, 2009). Previous research found that participants who affirmed compassionate goals reported lower self-image goals, felt less competitive, more peaceful and empathic, and were less worried about rejection than the control group. Participants who affirmed self-enhancement values, on the other hand, reported higher self-image goals and lower compassionate goals, felt less loving and connected, reported more positive ego-related emotions (e.g., superior, admirable), and were marginally more competitive and less trusting. In sum, affirming self-transcendent values induced the states associated with

compassionate goals, whereas affirming self-enhancement values induced states associated with self-image goals.

After the manipulation, each couple was asked to discuss one randomly selected relationship problem or difficulty for ten minutes. The discussion was minimally structured to encourage open conversation. Participants were told that there was no right or wrong behavior and encouraged to act naturally as if they were at home. Discussions were videotaped and audio recorded.

Next, participants were separated and completed a follow-up series of postlab questionnaires assessing their relationship goals and responses to the discussion, including their perception of partners' interpersonal goals during the discussion, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, closed-mindedness during the discussion, discussion satisfaction, the extent to which the problem had been resolved, lack of closure of the issue, and the probability that they would discuss the problem again in the future. Finally, participants were debriefed and engaged in a short exercise where they each shared one to two good things about the relationship to minimize negative or hard feelings resulting from the problem discussion.

Online Measures

The online survey included measures of compassionate and self-image goals, zero-sum beliefs, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, relationship conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern, and interpersonal trust.

Interpersonal goals. Compassionate and self-image goals were assessed using items derived from the Crocker and Canevello (2008) scale. All items began with the phrase "In my relationship with my significant other, I want / try to..." Nine items measured compassionate goals: "Have compassion for my partner's mistakes and weaknesses," "Be supportive of my

partner,” “Be constructive in my comments to my partner,” “Avoid being selfish or self-centered,” “Avoid doing things that aren’t helpful to me or others,” “Avoid neglecting my relationship with my partner,” “Avoid doing anything that would be harmful to my partner,” “Be aware of the impact my behavior might have on my partner’s feelings,” and “Make a positive difference in my partner’s life”. Five items measured self-image goals: “Avoid the possibility of being wrong,” “Convince my partner that I am right,” “Avoid showing my weaknesses,” “Avoid being blamed or criticized,” and “Avoid revealing my shortcomings and vulnerabilities”. Items were rated on a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*Not at all*), 2 (*A little*), 3 (*Somewhat*), 4 (*A lot*) and 5 (*Extremely*). The scales showed good reliability (compassionate goals: $\alpha = .73$; self-image goals: $\alpha = .77$).

Nonzero-sum. Nonzero-sum beliefs (e.g. the beliefs that outcomes and decisions may be mutually beneficial), were assessed using items derived from the Crocker and Canevello (2008) scale. Items began with the phrase “In romantic relationships...,” and included: “When a conflict occurs it is possible to find a situation that is good for both individuals,” “When one person gets what he/she wants, the other person usually suffers” (reverse), “It is usually possible for both individuals get what they need,” “What is good for one person is often bad for the other” (reverse), “I will ultimately be better off if I focus on my own needs and don’t think about my partner’s needs” (reverse), “I believe it is possible for us to execute our relationship in a way that makes both of us happy, even if it isn't always immediately apparent how that could be done,” “It is usually possible to resolve disagreements in mutually beneficial ways”. The measure used a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*strongly disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). The final scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .73$).

Understanding and defensive responses to conflict. Understanding and defensive responses to conflict were assessed using a version of the measure developed by Knee and colleagues (Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005). Items began with the phrase “After you and your significant other have a disagreement or misunderstanding, to what extent do you tend to feel that it led you to:”. Six items measured understanding responses: “Explore other points of view,” “Understand your relationship with your partner better,” “Understand yourself better,” “Understand the disagreement better,” “Feel closer to your partner,” and “Understand your partner better”. Three items measured defensive responses: “Want to yell or shout,” “Want to stop talking to your partner,” and “Want to leave or walk away”. The measure used a 7-point rating scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*). Both scales showed good reliability (understanding responses: $\alpha = .88$; defensive responses: $\alpha = .77$).

Relationship conflict. Relationship conflict was assessed using a version of the Social Conflict measure (Lepore, 1992). Items began with the phrase “Please indicate the extent to which each of the following has occurred in the past week,” and included: “You fought with your partner,” “You were upset with your partner,” “You had a disagreement with your partner,” “You felt like screaming at your partner,” “You and your partner criticized each other,” and “You and your partner had to iron-out differences”. Items were rated on a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*never*) and 5 (*very often*) and showed good reliability ($\alpha = .89$).

Partner-esteem. Partner-esteem was assessed using items adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem measure (Rosenberg, 1965). Five items read as follows: “I feel that my partner is a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others,” “I feel that my partner has a number of good qualities,” “All in all, I am inclined to feel that my partner is a failure” (reverse), “On the whole, I am satisfied with my partner,” and “I wish I could have more respect for my partner”

(reverse). The measure used a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*moderately disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*moderately agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*) and reliability was fair ($\alpha = .52$).

Empathic concern. Empathic concern was assessed using a version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index Empathic Concern Subscale (Davis, 1983). Seven items included: “I often have tender, concerned feelings for my partner when he/she is less fortunate than me,” “Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for my partner when he/she is having problems” (reverse), “When I see my partner being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her,” “My partner's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal” (reverse), “When I see my partner being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for him/her” (reverse), “I am often quite touched by things that I see happen,” and “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person”. The measure used a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*Does not describe me well*) and 5 (*Describes me very well*) and reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .68$).

Interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust was assessed using a version of the Interpersonal Trust Subscale from the Eating Disorders Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983). Seven items included: “I am open about my feelings,” “I trust others, especially my partner,” “I need to keep my partner at a certain distance (feel uncomfortable if he/she tries to get too close)” (reverse), “I can communicate with my partner easily,” “I can talk to him/her about personal thoughts or feelings,” “I have a close relationship with my partner,” and “I have trouble expressing my emotions to my partner” (reverse). The measure used a 5-point rating scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 5 (*very often*) and reliability was good ($\alpha = .77$).

Lab Session Measures

The prelab survey only assessed interpersonal goals. The postlab survey included measures of interpersonal goals, perception of significant others' interpersonal goals, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, closed-mindedness, discussion satisfaction, problem resolution, discussion lack in closure, and probability of further discussion.

Interpersonal goals. Compassionate and self-image goals were assessed at prelab and postlab using the items from the online measure. Prelab questions began with the phrase "Right now, in relation to my significant other, I want / try to:". Postlab items began with the phrase "Right now, in light of the conversation I just had, I want to...". The reliabilities were good (compassionate goals, $\alpha = .79$ and $.87$ at pre- and postlab, respectively; self-image goals, $\alpha = .78$ and $.83$ at prelab and postlab, respectively).

Perception of significant others' interpersonal goals. Perception of significant others' compassionate and self-image goals were measured using items derived from the compassionate and self-image goals measure. Items began with the phrase "In the conversation with my partner I just had, my partner intended to / tried to...". Nine items measured perceptions of significant others' compassionate goals including: "Have compassion for my mistakes and weaknesses," "Be supportive of me," "Be constructive in his/her comments to me," "Avoid being selfish or self-centered," "Avoid doing things that aren't helpful to him/her or others," "Avoid neglecting our relationship," "Avoid doing anything that would be harmful to me," "Be aware of the impact his/her behavior might have on my feelings," and "Make a positive difference in my life". Six items measured perceptions of significant others' self-image goals, including: "Avoid the possibility of being wrong," "Convince me that he/she is right," "Avoid showing his/her weaknesses," "Get me to do things his/her way," "Avoid being blamed or criticized," and "Avoid revealing his/her shortcomings or vulnerabilities". The measure used a 5-point rating

scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 5 (*extremely*), and reliabilities were good (perceived compassionate goals, $\alpha = .89$; perceived self-image goals, $\alpha = .91$).

Understanding and defensive responses to conflict. Understanding and defensive responses to conflict were measured at postlab using items from the online measure. Items began with the phrase “In the conversation you just had, how often or to what extent did you”. “Yell or shout” was added to the online defensive responses scale. Reliability was good (understanding: $\alpha = .88$; defensive: $\alpha = .87$).

Closed-mindedness. Closed-mindedness was assessed using a 4-item measure designed for this study. All items began with the phrase “After or during the discussion you just had with your significant other, to what extent do you feel it led you to:” and read as follows: “Be open-minded about your partner’s point of view” (reverse), “Consider your partner’s point of view to be less valid than your own,” “Care little about what your partner had to say,” and “Understand and value that your partner’s perceptions of the situation are valid and have worth” (reverse). The measure used a 7-point rating scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*) and the scale had good reliability ($\alpha = .74$).

Discussion satisfaction. Discussion satisfaction was assessed using single item “After or during the discussion you just had with your significant other, to what extent do you feel it led you to think the discussion went well?” The item was rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*).

Problem resolution. Problem resolution was assessed using a single item “After or during the discussion you just had with your significant other, to what extent do you feel it led you to feel the problem was resolved?” The item was rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*).

Discussion lack in closure. Discussion lack in closure was assessed using a single item “After or during the discussion you just had with your significant other, to what extent do you feel it led you to think the discussion lacked closure?” The item was rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*).

Probability of further discussion. Probability of further discussion, or how likely it was that the couple would be willing to discuss the same problem again in the future, was assessed using 4 items designed for this study. Items began with the phrase “After or during the discussion you just had with your significant other, to what extent do you feel it led you to:” and included: “Be reluctant to discuss the problem or issue again” (reverse), “Be excited about resolving the problem further in the future,” “Feel confident in your ability to conquer issues with your partner in the future,” and “Want to avoid any further discussion of this subject matter” (reverse). The measure used a 7-point rating scale, with 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*) and reliability was good ($\alpha = .71$).

Results

Analysis Overview & Strategy

Analyses were conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I tested correlational hypotheses outlined under hypothesis set 1. In the second phase, I tested whether the experimental manipulation caused changes in participants’ outcomes after the lab discussion.

Hypothesis Set 1: Replicating Pre-Existing Interpersonal Goal Data for Romantic Relationships

I hypothesized that when people had higher compassionate goals, they would report lower conflict, higher nonzero-sum beliefs, higher understanding responses to conflict, and higher partner-esteem, empathic concern and interpersonal trust. Additionally, I hypothesized that when people had higher self-image goals, they would report higher zero-sum beliefs, higher

conflict and defensive responses to conflict, and higher partner-esteem, empathic concern and interpersonal trust. Table 1 shows the intrapersonal correlations between all online measures. I tested whether participants' compassionate and self-image goals predicted their zero-sum beliefs, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, romantic relationship conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern and interpersonal trust using a linear-mixed model to account for the interdependence among couples in the study. All predictors were grand mean centered. Because of the small correlation between compassionate and self-image goals, I applied a multiple regression strategy, regressing participants' outcome variables onto their compassionate and self-image goals.

Results generally supported my hypotheses. Compassionate relationship goals positively predicted non-zero sum beliefs, understanding responses to conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern and interpersonal trust (see Table 2). Compassionate goals did not predict defensive responses to conflict or relationship conflict. Additionally, when people had higher self-image goals, they also had higher zero-sum beliefs and defensive responses to conflict, marginally higher conflict, and lower understanding responses to conflict, partner-esteem, empathic concern and interpersonal trust.

Hypothesis Set 2: Do goals cause outcomes after discussions about relationship problems?

Because two couples (4 participants) were removed from experimental analyses due to improper manipulation execution in the lab session, only 65 couples were included in tests of the experimental hypotheses.

I hypothesized that affirming self-transcendent values would cause actors to report higher compassionate goals and perception of significant others' compassionate goals, higher positive responses to conflict including understanding and open-mindedness, and higher conversation

quality including discussion satisfaction, problem resolution and discussion closure, and I predicted that partners' responses would show identical patterns of responses since the actors' behaviors would influence the partners' behaviors. Additionally, I hypothesized that affirming self-enhancement values would cause people to report higher self-image goals and perception of significant others' self-image goals, higher negative responses to conflict, and lower conversation quality, and I predicted that partners' responses would show identical patterns of responses since the actors' behaviors would influence the partners' behaviors. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of all postlab variables.

First, I checked whether the manipulation successfully shifted actors' compassionate and self-image goals using a one-way ANOVA with actor condition as the independent variable and postlab compassionate and self-image goals as the dependent variables. Results revealed no statistically significant differences by condition (see Table 4).

Second, I tested whether condition shifted actors' goal-related responses using a one-way ANOVA with actor condition as the independent variable and actor responses to postlab perception of significant other's compassionate and self-image goals, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, closed-mindedness, discussion satisfaction, problem resolution, discussion lack in closure and probability of further discussion as the dependent variables. Results revealed no statistically significant differences by condition (see Table 4).

Third, I tested whether condition shifted partners' goals and goal-related responses using a one-way ANOVA with actor condition as the independent variable and partner responses to postlab perception of significant other's compassionate and self-image goals, understanding and defensive responses to conflict, closed-mindedness, discussion satisfaction, problem resolution,

discussion lack in closure and probability of further discussion as the dependent variables.

Results revealed no statistically significant differences by condition (see Table 5).

Exploratory Analyses: Do prelab and online goals predict postlab outcomes?

Although tests of the experimental manipulation suggest that values-affirmations did not affect participants' experiences during the discussion, I tested whether prelab and online compassionate and self-image goals predicted the outcomes from the experimental hypotheses. Table 6 shows the intrapersonal correlations between online, prelab and postlab variables. Because compassionate and self-image goals were negatively correlated at online, prelab, and postlab, I regressed postlab outcomes on people's own prelab and online compassionate and self-image goals, using linear mixed-modeling. Again, prelab and online compassionate and self-image goals were grand mean centered.

Table 7 shows unstandardized regression coefficients, standard error, t-statistics, degrees of freedom and partial correlations for the associations among prelab compassionate and self-image goals and other postlab variables. Prelab results showed that when people had higher prelab compassionate goals, they also reported higher postlab compassionate goals, perception of others' compassionate goals, understanding, discussion satisfaction and probability of further discussion, and lower closed-mindedness. When people had higher prelab self-image goals, they also reported higher postlab self-image goals, perception of others' self-image goals, discussion lack in closure, and marginally higher closed-mindedness, as well as lower discussion satisfaction and problem resolution.

Table 8 shows unstandardized regression coefficients, standard error, t-statistics, degrees of freedom and partial correlations for the associations among online compassionate and self-image goals and other postlab variables. Online results showed that when people had higher

online compassionate goals, their postlab responses showed the same pattern as with prelab compassionate goals, except online compassionate goals also predicted lower postlab self-image goals and lower postlab defensiveness. When people had higher online self-image goals, their postlab responses showed the same pattern as with prelab self-image goals, except online self-image goals also predicted lower postlab understanding and lower probability of further discussion.

Discussion

Romantic couples experience problem solving discussions as part of every day life, and such discussions can either help couples grow or tear them apart. Compassionate and self-image goals play a role in problem discussion navigation, and they may make the difference between positive and negative relationship outcomes.

This study had two aims: to examine associations between interpersonal goals and relationship outcomes in romantic relationships, and to extend beyond previous research and test associations between compassionate and self-image goals and relationship outcomes in individual interactions.

Implications of Interpersonal Goals for Romantic Relationships

Results from hypotheses set 1 revealed that compassionate and self-image goal relationship outcomes are very similar to those of peer relationships. While compassionate goals don't predict lower amounts of conflict in romantic relationships, people with higher compassionate goals approach the conflict in a more constructive manner; as a result, they experience their conversations as more constructive. They believe that decisions can be mutually beneficial, and they generally approach problems with positive, other-directed attitudes, such as understanding. And because people with compassionate goals value others and attempt to

support others, people with higher compassionate goals show higher concern for their partners, and they trust their partners more. These positive traits often lead to successful problem solving navigation, and theoretically more successful relationships (Beach, Tesser, Fincham, Jones, Johnson & Whitaker, 1998).

On the other hand, people with higher self-image goals have higher conflict, possibly because they fail to communicate instead of proactively discussing issues before they become arguments. As a result, people with higher self-image goals face more conflict in the relationship. Even more importantly, the conflict that they do experience is more likely to be destructive for the relationship, as self-image goals predict decreased understanding and increased defensive responses to conflict. Also, because people with high self-image goals are more interested in protecting the self, getting their own needs met and being seen in a certain light, they generally have higher zero-sum beliefs, less esteem for their partners, less empathic concern for their partners, and they trust their partners less. If compassionate goals promote increased positive romantic relationship problem navigation, self-image goals work against problem solving, making relationship problems more negative, destructive and difficult.

Implications of Interpersonal Goals for Individual Interactions

While there was no causal relationship between self-transcendence or enhancement and problem discussion strategies, interpersonal goals do function within individual interactions. Participants' compassionate and self-image goals measured at the beginning of their lab sessions, which asked participants' what their goals were like at that moment, successfully predicted many of their responses to the lab discussion. Because interpersonal goals can vary from moment to moment, these fluctuations can influence each individual interaction that we have, and success of certain problem discussions versus failure of others might be the result of these temporal

differences in goals. However, participants' interpersonal goals for their relationships measured online before their lab sessions, which asked about their goals for their relationships in general, predicted more participant responses to problem discussions than the 'right now' goals measured at the beginning of the lab session; general online compassionate goals additionally predicted lower postlab self-image goals and lower defensiveness and general online self-image goals additionally predicted lower postlab understanding and lower probability of further discussion. So, while interpersonal goals for the relationship can change from week to week, day to day or even minute to minute, and these fluctuations in goals can affect individual interactions, general overarching goals for the relationship have implications for problem solving outcomes in addition to momentary goals.

Statistically Insignificant Results: Values-Affirmation Manipulation

While it is clear that the values-affirmation manipulation did not work, it is not clear why this was the case. There are at least two potential reasons for why the values-affirmation manipulations did not shift goals or outcomes related to the discussion.

First, the self-transcendent and self-enhancement values-affirmation manipulations may not affect relationship outcomes. As mentioned previously, this manipulation has been shown to alter self-related outcomes, such as affect, self-regulation and acceptance of potentially harmful information, but it has never been shown to affect interpersonal relationships (Burson et al., 2009; Canevello & Crocker, 2008a). It is possible that while the manipulation affects people's feelings about the self by thinking about what is important to them, it doesn't affect how they feel about others or their relationships. Affirming one's own values may not connect the person to their relationship or their partners' needs. Somehow affirming what is important to the self doesn't transfer to what is important for how people interact with others. Perhaps a manipulation

that focuses more on relationship related factors would be more effective at altering relationship-related goals, such as a values-affirmation manipulation that asks people to affirm self- and other-directed values related to relationships (Burson et al., 2008).

Second, the manipulation may have initially shifted actors' goals, but as soon as couples were asked to engage in problem discussions, participants reverted back to their pre-existing levels of goals. This could have happened for a number of reasons. For example, because couples engage in problem discussions as a part of daily life, learning models would suggest that they have reinforced their styles of problem solving, whether they are compassionate or self-image in nature. So, regardless of any initial shift in goals from the manipulation, partners adopt their pre-existing goals for the relationship to engage in the discussion, because that is what they are accustomed to doing. Another possibility is that engaging in a potentially threatening or harmful discussion causes participants to revert to pre-existing levels of self-image goals, no matter if they were high or low, eliminating any condition effects. It is also possible that there is a difference in pre-existing goals or goal strength depending on the length of the established romantic relationship. So, because couples who have been together longer have learned from previous discussions that they should attempt to support and understand their partner in order to avoid negative consequences from the discussion, they adopt more compassionate goals in problem solving compared to less established couples; couples revert back to their pre-established levels of compassionate goals, no matter if they were high or low. This would also eliminate any condition effects.

Limitations

Because the values-affirmation failed to shift actor or partner goals, this study doesn't clarify any causal relationships between interpersonal goals and problem solving outcomes.

While I expect that interpersonal goals are causally related to outcomes because of the strength of the regressions, only successful experimental research can determine the direction of causality.

In addition, this research was conducted on a very limited sample of college age students from The University of Michigan and surrounding areas, who for the most part were involved in committed non-married relationships. The couples are possibly atypical in their responses, as they don't have established families, careers, or may not take their relationships as seriously as older or more experienced couples. Similarly, responses to problem solving may differ depending on the region of the country and the social customs in that area. It is unclear whether the findings from this study are generalizable to the whole population of people involved in romantic relationships in the United States.

Also I did not ask how serious or important the issues that couples discussed were to them, or how much they had discussed the selected problem or issue before the lab discussion. It is possible that the significance of the issue or their previous discussions related more to how people approached the discussions than their goals for that discussion.

Implications for the Study of Romantic Relationships

This data suggests that an interpersonal goal perspective, expanded from the defensive goal perspective proposed by Fincham and Beach (1999), provides the missing comprehensive theory for understanding romantic relationships and conflicts in general. Clinically, this research provides tangible tools to help couples relate to one another when problems arise. Interpersonal goals make the difference between positive and negative responses to conflict and relationship outcomes; they influence the ways in which romantic relationship partners perceive one another, their roles in their relationships and their abilities to trust and understand one another. A lot of people work from a place of 'if only my partner would... pay more attention, listen better, etc,

then I would have a better relationship', but this data suggests that people's own goals affect how they react. When they attempt to support their partners, be there for them, and understand their points of view instead of trying to get their partners to change or do things their way, their relationship discussions and reactions to conflict are better.

This paper suggests that even in a single interaction, goals make a difference. So while some days are more trying than others, and while sometimes people feel they need to look out for themselves, self-image attitudes can negatively impact relationships, even when the goals are only transient. However, while transient goals play a role in managing everyday relationship problems and issues, overarching and general goals for the relationship also have implications for problem solving outcomes.

In the long run, adopting compassionate goals instead of self-image goals for romantic relationships can improve the quality of the relationship, and possibly lead to better quality of life and happiness in general.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Intrapersonal Correlations for All Online Variables

Online Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Compassionate Goals	---									4.33	0.42
2. Self-Image Goals	-.15 [†]	---								2.84	0.72
3. Zero-Sum Beliefs	-.49**	.26**	---							1.68	0.43
4. Understanding	.40**	-.24**	-.47**	---						4.92	1.15
5. Defensiveness	-.15 [†]	.20*	.15 [†]	-.17*	---					2.7	1.46
6. Romantic Relationship Conflict	-.13	.18*	.20*	-.12	.52**	---				1.94	0.74
7. Partner-Esteem	.33**	-.19*	-.46**	.22**	-.24**	-.36**	---			4.7	0.33
8. Empathic Concern	.51**	-.28**	-.44**	.36**	-.09	-.11	.40**	---		4.36	0.48
9. Trust	.31**	-.31**	-.41**	.29**	-.17*	-0.13	.29**	.40**	---	4.26	0.55

Note. $N = 159$ for all variables except 9. Interpersonal Trust, $N = 158$. Compassionate and Self-Image Goals were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Zero-Sum Beliefs and Partner-Esteem were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Understanding and Defensiveness were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Romantic Relationship Conflict was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Empathic Concern was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me very well*). Trust was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). [†] $p < .07$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Standard Error, ts, df and Partial Correlations for the Associations Among Online Compassionate and Self-Image Goals and Other Online Variables

Variable	<i>Online Compassionate Goals</i>					<i>Online Self-Image Goals</i>				
	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>
Zero-Sum Beliefs	-0.48	0.07	-6.87**	149.74	-0.49	0.12	0.04	2.84**	155.82	0.22
Understanding	0.97	0.2	4.83**	155.98	0.36	-0.28	0.12	-2.47*	151.98	-0.2
Defensiveness	-0.47	0.28	-1.71	154.6	-0.14	0.36	0.16	2.24*	155.18	0.18
Relationship Conflict	-0.2	0.14	-1.45	155.88	-0.12	0.16	0.08	1.95 [†]	149.82	0.16
Partner-Esteem	0.22	0.06	3.70**	155.03	0.28	-0.07	0.03	-2.18*	145.09	-0.18
Empathic Concern	0.57	0.08	7.35**	155.98	0.51	-0.14	0.04	-3.13**	152.08	-0.25
Trust	0.35	0.1	3.59**	152.03	0.28	-0.21	0.06	-3.70**	154.77	-0.28

Note. $N = 159$ for all variables except Trust, $N = 158$. [†] $p < .06$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of Dependent Variables at Postlab

Variable	Actor		Partner	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Compassionate Goals	4.41	0.56	4.47	0.49
Self-Image Goals	2.51	0.85	2.31	0.78
Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	4.07	0.70	4.06	0.70
Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	2.16	0.94	2.26	0.95
Understanding	4.80	1.31	4.72	1.17
Defensiveness	1.22	0.64	1.24	0.79
Closed-Mindedness	2.12	0.89	2.07	0.97
Discussion Satisfaction	5.62	1.47	5.63	1.31
Problem Resolution	4.35	1.95	4.12	1.90
Discussion Lack in Closure	3.22	2.07	3.49	1.96
Probability of Further Discussion	5.68	1.07	5.77	1.07

Note. Compassionate, Self-Image Goals, Perception of Significant Other's Compassionate and Self-Image goals were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Zero-Sum Beliefs and Partner-Esteem were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Understanding, Defensiveness, Closed-Mindedness, Discussion Satisfaction, Problem Resolution, Discussion Lack in Closure and Probability of Further Discussion were all measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Table 4

Between Group p-values at Postlab for Actors, ANOVA by Condition (df 2, 62)

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Compassionate Goals	0.10	.90
Self-Image Goals	0.13	.88
Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	0.11	.90
Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	0.75	.48
Understanding	0.82	.45
Defensiveness	1.11	.34
Closed-Mindedness	0.66	.52
Discussion Satisfaction	0.66	.52
Problem Resolution	0.07	.94
Discussion Lack in Closure	0.55	.58
Probability of Further Discussion	0.65	.53

Note. No outcomes were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5

Between Group p-values at Postlab for Partners, ANOVA by Condition (df 2, 62)

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Compassionate Goals	0.52	.60
Self-Image Goals	0.43	.65
Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	0.31	.74
Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	0.47	.63
Understanding	1.32	.28
Defensiveness	0.39	.68
Closed-Mindedness	0.09	.91
Discussion Satisfaction	0.40	.67
Problem Resolution	0.56	.58
Discussion Lack in Closure	0.35	.71
Probability of Further Discussion	1.53	.23

Note. No statistically significant outcomes at the 0.05 level.

Table 6

Intrapersonal Correlations for All Exploratory Analysis Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Online Compassionate Goals	---														
2. Online Self-Image Goals	-.15†	---													
3. Prelab Compassionate Goals	.67**	-.23**	---												
4. Prelab Self-Image Goals	-.28**	.65**	-.28**	---											
5. Postlab Compassionate Goals	.62**	-.12	.77**	-.19*	---										
6. Postlab Self-Image Goals	-.274**	.54**	-.28**	.72**	-.33**	---									
7. Postlab Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	.48**	-.18*	.59**	-.24**	.70**	-.50**	---								
8. Postlab Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	-.16†	.30**	-.24**	.38**	-.33**	.63**	-.55**	---							
9. Postlab Understanding	.34**	-.27**	.34**	-.20*	.44**	-.39**	.55**	-.30**	---						
10. Postlab Defensiveness	-.21*	.08	-.19*	.18*	-.34**	.27**	-.38**	.42**	-.20*	---					
11. Postlab Closed-Mindedness	-.40**	.23**	-.45**	.33**	-.61**	.47**	-.65**	.41**	-.59**	.54**	---				
12. Postlab Discussion Satisfaction	.19*	-.32**	.18*	-.26**	.30**	-.39**	.50**	-.34**	.51**	-.32**	-.49**	---			
13. Postlab Problem Resolution	.27**	-.26**	.26**	-.27**	.36**	-.41**	.53**	-.41**	.54**	-.27**	-.48**	.55**	---		
14. Postlab Discussion Lack in Closure	.02	.11	.06	.06	-.04	.19*	-.24**	.18*	-.28**	.25**	.24**	-.36**	-.40**	---	
15. Postlab Probability of Further Discussion	.47**	-.27**	.47**	-.25**	.48**	-.32**	.57**	-.36**	.39**	-.16†	-.42**	.32**	.46**	-.21*	---

Note. $N = 159$ for all online variables and $N = 134$ for all prelab and postlab variables. † $p < .07$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 7

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Standard Error, ts, df and Partial Correlations for the Associations Among Prelab Compassionate and Self-Image Goals and Other Postlab Variables

Postlab Variable	<i>Prelab Compassionate Goals</i>					<i>Prelab Self-Image Goals</i>				
	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>
Compassionate Goals	1.01	0.08	13.16**	129.44	0.76	0.02	0.04	0.47	124.73	0.04
Self-Image Goals	-0.19	0.13	-1.51	130.95	-0.13	0.82	0.07	11.16**	118.47	0.72
Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	0.98	0.13	7.58**	130.96	0.55	-0.05	0.07	-0.75	117.92	-0.07
Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	-0.36	0.20	-1.83	128.27	-0.16	0.38	0.11	3.49**	107.1	0.32
Understanding	0.96	0.27	3.58**	130.4	0.3	-0.23	0.15	-1.47	122.4	-0.13
Defensiveness	-0.28	0.16	-1.79	123.39	-0.16	0.15	0.09	-1.59	129.54	-0.14
Closed-Mindedness	-0.87	0.19	-4.64**	131	-0.38	0.27	0.11	2.58*	116.97	0.23
Discussion Satisfaction	0.76	0.29	2.61*	124.49	0.23	-0.42	0.16	-2.67**	102.68	-0.25
Problem Resolution	0.41	0.41	1.00	126.43	0.09	-0.53	0.23	-2.32*	104.47	-0.22
Discussion Lack in Closure	-0.37	0.43	-0.88	127.32	-0.08	-0.77	0.24	3.25**	106.05	0.30
Probability of Further Discussion	1.12	0.21	5.23**	130.37	0.42	-0.20	0.12	-1.60	122.06	-0.14

Note. $N = 134$ at Online and Postlab. † $p < .06$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 8

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Standard Error, ts, df and Partial Correlations for the Associations Among Online Compassionate and Self-Image Goals and Other Postlab Variables

Postlab Variable	Online Compassionate Goals					Online Self-Image Goals				
	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>pr</i>
Compassionate Goals	0.84	0.09	8.97**	116.85	0.64	-0.01	0.05	-0.27	129.33	-0.02
Self-Image Goals	-0.40	0.16	-2.55*	125.62	-0.22	0.58	0.08	6.79**	130.76	0.51
Perception of Significant Others' Compassionate Goals	0.81	0.14	5.69**	124.19	0.45	-0.09	0.08	-1.20	130.84	-0.10
Perception of Significant Others' Self-Image Goals	-0.25	0.21	-1.18	130.96	-0.10	0.28	0.11	2.55*	121.63	0.22
Understanding	1.00	0.27	3.77**	125.84	0.32	-0.39	0.14	-2.70**	130.74	-0.23
Defensiveness	-0.37	0.16	-2.29*	120.71	-0.20	0.05	0.09	0.54	130.76	0.05
Closed-Mindedness	-0.84	0.20	-4.25**	128.33	-0.35	0.20	0.11	1.93†	129.21	0.17
Discussion Satisfaction	0.84	0.30	2.79**	130.24	0.24	-0.39	0.16	-2.47*	118.92	-0.22
Problem Resolution	0.53	0.42	1.26	130.84	0.11	-0.67	0.22	-3.03**	120.75	-0.27
Discussion Lack in Closure	-0.60	0.44	-1.36	130.99	-0.12	0.73	0.23	3.14**	122.66	0.27
Probability of Further Discussion	1.17	0.22	5.42**	127.44	0.43	-0.30	0.12	-2.62*	130.07	-0.22

Note. *N* = 159 at Online and *N* = 134 at Postlab. † *p* < .06, * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.