

# Why are we together? A dyadic longitudinal investigation of relationship motivation, goal progress, and adjustment

Anne C. Holding<sup>1</sup>  | Meaghan Barlow<sup>2</sup> | Richard Koestner<sup>1</sup>  | Carsten Wrosch<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montréal, Quebec, Canada

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Concordia University, Montréal, Quebec, Canada

## Correspondence

Anne C. Holding, Department of Psychology, McGill University, 2001 Avenue McGill College, Montréal, QC H3A 1G1, Canada.  
Email: anne.holding@mail.mcgill.ca

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This investigation used self-determination theory to study goal striving in the context of romantic relationships. The study explored how dyadic partners' relationship motivation impacted goal progress, personal well-being, and relationship satisfaction. In addition, the mediating role of relationship goal progress was explored.

**Method:** In a prospective longitudinal study, 153 heterosexual couples rated their own relationship motivation and each reported a relationship goal and a self-oriented goal. Goal progress was assessed approximately 1 year later. In addition, well-being and relationship satisfaction were assessed at baseline and follow-up.

**Results:** Actor-partner interdependence models revealed that actor's autonomous relationship motivation was positively associated with relationship and self-oriented goal progress. Actor's autonomous relationship motivation, as well as both actor and partner relationship goal progress, were associated with increases in actor's subjective well-being (SWB) and relationship satisfaction. Relationship goal progress mediated the association between actor's autonomous relationship motivation and SWB, as well as relationship satisfaction.

**Conclusions:** Together, these findings contribute to research on relationship motivation and goal striving in dyadic partners, by suggesting that motivational regulations impact goal regulation in romantic relationships and associated well-being outcomes.

## KEYWORDS

goal progress, relationship motivation, relationship satisfaction, subjective well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Relationship motivation theory (RMT) posits that autonomous motivation is an important predictor of relationship satisfaction and psychological wellness for both the partners within romantic dyads (RMT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relationship autonomy is defined as fully endorsing one's involvement in the relationship and experiencing a genuine desire to be with one's partner (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990). As such, relationship autonomy allows partners to more fully integrate the relationship into their authentic selves and is

associated with healthier, more adaptive relationships (Blais et al., 1990). Conversely, individuals low in relationship autonomy may not fully endorse their reasons for being in the relationship, feeling pressures to be with their partner such as fear of being alone, feelings of guilt about ending a commitment, or having a strong desire to please others, with adverse consequences for partners' well-being and relationship satisfaction (Blais et al., 1990).

However, little is known about how each partner's relationship motivation affects the goals that partners set and pursue in the context of their romantic relationship. Given that goal

pursuit lends a sense of structure, meaning, and purpose to everyday life (Austin & Vancouver, 1996) and is an important predictor of life satisfaction and positive affect (King, 2008), understanding the effect of relationship motivation on goal progress in dyadic members is warranted. Does fully endorsing the romantic relationship allow dyadic members to make more progress on relationship goals? Self-regulation research has long considered the role of motivation in personal goal pursuit, consistently finding that autonomous motivation for goals leads to greater effort, progress, and attainment, as well as increased well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). However, these studies have considered autonomous motivation at the level of the goal, not at the level of the relationship. The present study aimed at bridging RMT with the literature on motivation for goal pursuit. We sought to investigate how each partner's motivation for the relationship impacts progress on a relationship goal and self-oriented goal. More specifically, we sought to understand whether the degree of autonomy dyadic partners felt about participating in their romantic relationship would relate to the amount of progress they made on personal goals. We expected that dyadic partners' autonomous reasons for engaging in the relationship would help them make progress with goals targeting the relationship and with goals targeting each dyadic member's own pursuit (i.e., self-oriented goals). Moreover, we reasoned that the effects of relationship motivation on goal progress could enhance both partners' subjective well-being (SWB) and relationship satisfaction.

## 1.1 | Relationship motivation theory

Motivational regulations play an important role in romantic relationships. To this end, RMT, a mini-theory embedded in self-determination theory (SDT), proposes that feeling relatedness with others is an intrinsic psychological need critical to psychological wellness and thriving (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness is defined as the intrinsically satisfying experience of feeling connected with and valued by another person (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 297). An important tenet of RMT is that the caring and connection a person feels toward one's partner is given freely and wholeheartedly (i.e., autonomously), as opposed to instrumentally or forced (i.e., controlled). As such, experiencing autonomous motivation for engaging with the relationship should be associated with greater need satisfaction than engaging with the relationship for external rewards or internal pressures (i.e., controlled motivation; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Initial evidence for the assumption that couples' autonomous motivation to maintain their relationship could enhance dyadic well-being and feelings of relationship satisfaction has been documented in cross-sectional research (Blais et al., 1990). Other work built upon these findings by showing in daily diary studies that greater relationship autonomy

predicted increased satisfaction with partners following disagreements (Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005). The latter research further reported that relationship autonomy predicted decreased defensiveness and more understanding during conflicts, which in turn was associated with higher relationship satisfaction. In addition, a study exploring undergraduates' disagreements with their romantic partners found that the association between psychological need fulfillment and relationship satisfaction was mediated by autonomous motives toward maintaining the relationship (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Together these studies provide evidence that endorsing autonomous involvement in a relationship, rather than feeling coerced or guilty about being involved in the relationship, is associated with relationship satisfaction and adaptive conflict resolution. However, the role of goal pursuit in the association between autonomous relationship motivation and relationship satisfaction has not yet been studied.

## 1.2 | SDT research on goal pursuit and adjustment

Different theories of motivation propose that progress in the pursuit of personal goals and their attainment is integral for well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010, 2019). Personal goals have been defined as cognitive representations of desired end states that a person is committed to attain (Carver & Scheier, 2000), and the beneficial effects of goal progress on well-being have been shown to be robust (Klug & Maier, 2015). As a consequence, some researchers have suggested that the best way for increasing long-term well-being is to adopt and pursue meaningful personal goals (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Given that goal progress is a vital source of sustained well-being, it is useful to consider motivational theories that can reliably predict the kinds of goals that will be fueled by prolonged effort and result in greater progress.

Researchers working from a SDT perspective have proposed that individuals pursue goals with different underlying motives. These motives fall on a continuum ranging from intrinsic motivation to external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT has made a primary distinction between autonomous motivation (i.e., "want to" motivation) and controlled motivation (i.e., "have to" motivation, e.g., Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, Hope, & Koestner, 2015). Autonomous motivation describes internalized reasons for goal pursuit, such as choosing a goal for the anticipated fun and enjoyment (*intrinsic motivation*), because a person believes that the goal is meaningful and important (*identified motivation*), or because the goal reflects a person's deeper values and identity (*integrated motivation*). In contrast, controlled motivation captures motivation that is only partially internalized or fully external: pursuing goals out of internal pressure, such as guilt and anxiety (*introjected*

*motive*), in response to anticipated rewards, praise, or punishment (*external motive*), or being unsure about the reasons for goal pursuit (*amotivation*).

While these distinct forms of regulation tend to co-occur to different degrees in most complex behaviors, they have been associated with contrasting outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, a large body of literature confirms that autonomously motivated goals are more likely to be attained (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Moreover, autonomous motivation is thought to be the starting point of a series of positive outcomes, whereby autonomous motivation leads to greater goal progress and well-being, which in turn, increases a person's autonomous motivation for subsequent goals (see the self-concordance model of goal striving; Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). In contrast, controlled reasons for goal pursuit have been associated with greater goal-related conflict and emotional distress over time (Holding, Hope, Harvey, Marion Jetten, & Koestner, 2017).

### 1.3 | Goal pursuit in the context of a romantic relationship

Despite the documented associations between autonomous motivation and well-being in romantic relationships (Blais et al., 1990; Knee et al., 2005; Patrick et al., 2007), little is known about how relationship motivation impacts goal striving within the dyadic context of a long-term romantic relationship. While empirical work on goal pursuit has predominantly focused on intrapersonal processes reflecting the pursuer's self-regulation, emerging research increasingly considers social processes in goal pursuit (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010), with new theories suggesting that romantic partners can be conceptualized as interdependent subparts of one self-regulating system (see transactive goal dynamics [TGD]; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & Vandellen, 2015). From this perspective, certain factors are thought to facilitate goal progress within a couple, whereas other factors may pose an additional challenge for the relationship. For example, it has been shown that romantic partners can influence the perceived attainability and value of a goal, which has consequences for the resources people devote to goal pursuit (Shah, 2005). Other dyadic research has focused on the degree of harmony between partner's goals. For example, Gere, Schimmack, Pinkus, and Lockwood (2011) found that when couples' goals were incongruent or in conflict with one another, the couples' relationship quality and partners' SWB were negatively impacted (for goal conflict and well-being, see also Emmons & King, 1988). Although goal research in romantic couples is a burgeoning field, each partners' relationship motivation has, to our best knowledge, not been studied in the context of relationship or self-oriented goals that emerge in romantic relationships. Since motivation is

the psychological force that enables action and fosters goal-directed behavior (Carver & Scheier, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), we reasoned that motivation for engaging in one's romantic relationship may influence goal-directed behavior that occurs in the context of this relationship.

While dyadic partners' relationship goals provide a clear example of goal pursuit that occurs in the context of the romantic relationship, TGD theory would suggest that even self-oriented goals are interpersonal when adopted in the context of a relationship (Fitzsimons et al., 2015). An illustration of this possibility, presented in Fitzsimons et al. (2015), is John who has a self-oriented goal of losing weight. Fitzsimons et al. (2015) argue that John's partner Alice can make choices, such as buying lots of fruits or/and vegetables, or ordering greasy pizza every day, which may impact John's weight loss goal. Along the same line of reasoning, Alice may be more inclined to make choices that support John's weight loss goal, if she holds autonomous motives for being in the relationship with John. Conversely, if Alice does not feel motivated about the relationship, or is in the relationship to please others (e.g., like her parents), she may be less inclined to behave in a way that supports or facilitates John's pursuits. This example can also be elaborated for John's relationship goals. If John feels autonomously motivated for being in his relationship with Alice, SDT research would suggest that he may feel more energized and volitional when pursuing goals that benefit the relationship, resulting in goal progress. This progress, in turn, is likely to make him feel happier (e.g., Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) and more satisfied in his relationship (Hofmann, Finkel, & Fitzsimons, 2015). His partner, too, may experience more satisfaction in the relationship if John has made progress toward a relationship goal. As a consequence, building upon RMT and SDT research on motivation and goal striving, we expected that autonomous relationship motivation should facilitate goal progress in romantic relationships and contribute to greater personal and relational wellness.

## 2 | CURRENT RESEARCH

The aims of the present longitudinal study of romantic couples were to (1) understand the role of autonomous relationship motivation for predicting progress with relationship goals and self-oriented personal goals, (2) examine the roles of relationship motivation and goal progress in predicting changes in SWB and relationship satisfaction over time, and (3) explore the mediating role of relationship goal progress in the association between relationship motivation and well-being outcomes.

Autonomous relationship motivation was operationalized as the relative degree to which dyadic partners held intrinsic, integrated, and identified reasons for participating in the relationship, as opposed to holding introjected,

external, or amotivated reasons for participating in the relationship (e.g., Blais et al., 1990; Gaine & La Guardia, 2009; Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005). Building upon the discussed theories and research, we hypothesized that holding autonomous reasons for being in the relationship would lead to increased progress with a relationship goal for the actor and partner. In other words, we suspected that when dyadic members experienced intrinsic, integrated, or identified reasons for participating in their romantic relationship, as opposed to feeling introjected, extrinsic or amotivated about participating in their romantic relationship, this would result in enhanced progress on a relationship goal.

To examine whether relationship motivation specifically benefitted relationship goals, or carried additional positive effects for dyadic members' self-oriented goals, we also measured participants' progress with a second, self-oriented goal. We did not specify a directed hypothesis for whether dyadic members' relationship motivation would be associated with self-oriented goal progress. On the one hand, given that much variability in motivation is at the level of the goal and not at the level of the person (Holding et al., 2017; Milyavskaya et al., 2015), there was a rationale not to expect relationship motivation to be associated with progress on self-oriented goals. On the other hand, TGD theory would suggest that even self-oriented goals are interpersonal when set in the context of a relationship (Fitzsimons et al., 2015). Thus, the quality of motivation for the relationship might impact self-oriented goal progress as well, such that autonomous relationship motivation could benefit self-oriented goal progress for actors and partners.

In addition, we sought to understand how relationship motivation and goal progress in dyadic members is linked to their SWB and relationship satisfaction over time. We hypothesized that autonomous motivation for the relationship would facilitate greater SWB and relationship satisfaction. Moreover, assuming that goal progress plays an important role in facilitating outcomes of well-being (Carver & Scheier, 2000), we hypothesized that relationship goal progress would mediate the associations between autonomous relationship motivation and changes toward increased SWB and relationship satisfaction (Knee et al., 2005; Li & Fung, 2011).

### 3 | METHODS

We recruited a sample of community-dwelling couples for a longitudinal study on goals and well-being. At T1 couples answered questions about a relationship and self-oriented goal, their relationship motivation, SWB, and relationship satisfaction. One year later, participants completed a follow-up survey assessing goal progress and well-being measures.

### 3.1 | Participants

The sample consisted of 153 heterosexual couples ( $n = 306$ ) from a large metropolitan city in Canada. Participants were recruited through newspaper advertisements. Our recruitment criteria specified that both partners had to be at least 18 years old and cohabitating. The average length of the relationship prior to participation was approximately 12 years ( $M = 11.78$ ,  $SD = 13.90$ ), with 68% of the sample married to their partner. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 82 years with a mean age of 47 years and a standard deviation of 16 years. We attempted to recruit a similar number of young (18–35 years), middle aged (40–55 years), and older adults (60 years and older). The majority of the sample reported still working (67%), while a quarter were retired (25%) and a minority never worked outside the family home (4%). The median household income was between CAN \$34,000–\$51,000. The median education level of the sample was college level, with 33% of participants holding Bachelor's degrees, 23% holding Master's degrees, and 3% holding a Doctorate degree. Two waves of data were collected, approximately 1 year apart ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ ). The final analytic sample included 110 couples ( $n = 220$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 47.03$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.98$ ). A total of 34 couples were excluded from the analyses because both partners did not participate in the second wave of data collection ( $n = 68$ ). Further, nine couples were excluded because one dyad member did not provide data on the outcome variables ( $n = 18$ ). Excluded participants were significantly younger ( $M = 41.65$ ,  $SD = 17.91$ ) than those retained ( $M = 47.03$ ,  $SD = 15.71$ ;  $t(302) = 2.56$ ,  $p = .01$ ), but did not differ on any other study variables at baseline ( $t > 1.780$ ,  $p > .07$ ).

### 3.2 | Procedure

Participants completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire booklet at each study assessment in the laboratory. For the baseline assessment the survey booklet was split to reduce participant fatigue. Participants were given the choice of completing both booklets at the lab or bringing the second questionnaire booklet home and mailing it to the lab in a pre-paid envelope. Participants were compensated \$30 each for their participation in each of the study assessments. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. The Concordia University Research Ethics Board approved all procedures and methods.

### 3.3 | Materials

#### 3.3.1 | Goal setting

At T1 participants were asked to report a relationship goal and another "self-oriented" personal goal. Goals were defined



as “objectives, plans, projects, or even “ways of being” that a person is trying to pursue in a particular span of time. Participants were instructed that some of these goals may be short-term goals, whereas other goals may take longer period of time to achieve. In addition, they were told that goals may be related to things you want to accomplish in your relationship with your partner, or things that you want to attain for yourself.” Some examples of relationship goals that participants set were “be more attentive to my husband” “to have a child in the near future.” Examples of self-oriented goals were “to write a novel” and “to lose weight.”

### 3.3.2 | Goal progress

Goal progress was assessed separately for the relationship goal and self-oriented goal at T2 with a composite of three items. The three items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale and included “Have you made progress toward achieving this goal since the last time you participated” (“No Progress” [0] to “Much Progress” [4]), “How far are you from reaching your goal?” (“Very far” [0] to “Very close” [4]), and “How satisfied are you with your goal progress so far?” (“Very unsatisfied” [0] to “Very Satisfied” [4]). Reliability estimates were satisfactory for the relationship goal ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and the self-oriented goal ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

### 3.3.3 | Relationship motivation

Relationship motivation was assessed at T1 with the Couples Motivation Questionnaire (CMQ; Blais et al., 1990) which assesses a person's autonomy regarding the reasons for being in the relationship. The questionnaire includes the stem, “Why are you in the relationship?” Each of the 21 items provides a reason for being in the relationship, and responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert-type scale with anchors of 1 (*Not at all*) and 7 (*Exactly*). A pattern was evident among the subscales such that those reflecting more autonomous or intrinsic reasons were more positively related to one another as compared to those reflecting less intrinsic reasons which were also more positively related to one another. In fact, subscales reflecting more autonomous reasons were negatively related to those reflecting less autonomous reasons. Consistent with Blais et al. (1990), as well as recent relationship motivation research (e.g., Gaine & La Guardia, 2009; Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005), an index of relationship motivation was computed by weighting the items according to where they fell on the relative autonomy continuum. Sample items included: “Because I love the many fun and exciting times I share with my partner” (intrinsic motive +3); “Because I value the way my relationship with my partner allows me to improve myself as a person” (integrated motive +2); “Because this is the person I have chosen to share life plans that are important to me” (identified motive

+1). Sample items for controlled relationship motivation included: “Because I would feel guilty if I separated from my partner” (introjected motive -1); “Because people who are important to me are proud of our relationship and I would not want to disappoint them” (external motive -2), “There is nothing to motivate me in maintaining my relationship with my partner” (amotivation -3). An overall index of relationship motivation was computed from the weighted subscales, with higher scores indicating more autonomous or intrinsic relationship motivation. Reliability estimates were satisfactory for autonomous relationship motivation ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and controlled relationship motivation ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

### 3.3.4 | Subjective well-being

We employed the PANAS to assess the emotional component of SWB at T1 and T2 (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). For each item, participants rated the extent to which they experienced a specific emotion on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Very slightly or not at all” (1) to “extremely” (5) during the past year. The scale consists of 20 items, 10 describing positive affect (e.g., enthusiastic and excited) and 10 describing negative affect (e.g., upset and distressed). In addition, the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale was employed to assess the cognitive component of SWB at T1 and T2 (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with statements regarding how satisfied they felt about the current conditions in their life on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all true” (1) to “very true” (7). A composite index of SWB was calculated by computing the mean of the standardized scores of positive affect, reversed negative affect, and satisfaction with life, separately for both time points. The reliability estimates were satisfactory for positive affect ( $\alpha = .90$ ), negative affect ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and life satisfaction ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

### 3.3.5 | Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured at baseline and T2 with the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) designed to measure general relationship satisfaction. Respondents answered each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 “not at all” to 4 “Very Much.” An example item is “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” We reverse scored the two negatively phrased items and then computed a mean relationship satisfaction score ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## 3.4 | Analytic strategy

We performed preliminary descriptive analyses (Pearson's correlations and paired-samples *t* tests) in SPSS version 23 to orient the reader to the dataset and variables of interest. Next, we estimated actor-partner interdependence models (APIM;

Kashy & Kenny, 1999) for our main analyses to directly model the inherent interdependence between individuals in a dyadic relationship (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). The rationale for this analysis is that one member of a dyad may not only influence his or her own dependent variable, but may also influence the other dyad member's dependent variable. In these analyses, an actor effect occurs when one member of the dyad's score on a predictor variable (e.g., relationship motivation) is associated with the same member's score on the criterion (e.g., relationship satisfaction or SWB). A partner effect occurs when one member's partner's score on a predictor variable is associated with the other member's score on the criterion.

To conduct the APIM analyses, our data were organized in a pairwise structure, in which each individual's record included their dyad number, partner number (i.e., dyad members arbitrarily coded as 1 or 2), as well as actor and partner scores on variables of interest (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Ledermann & Kenny, 2017). We utilized multilevel modeling with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimation, as implemented in the MIXED program in SPSS version 23. In these models, the slope values were fixed due to the limited degrees of freedom (i.e., only two dyad members), while the intercepts were allowed to vary between dyads. Importantly, we treated our dyads as indistinguishable because we had no theoretically grounded reasons to expect our effects to differ by sex. Accordingly, the error variances and covariances were set to equal among both dyad members (i.e., COVTYPE[CSR]).

For the first set of analyses, we sought to determine the impact of actor and partner relationship motivation on goal progress (i.e., relationship and self-oriented). In a first step, relevant covariates (i.e., mean age and gender) were entered in the model. Second, actor and partner relationship motivation were added to the model. For the second set of analyses, we sought to determine the impact of actor and partner relationship motivation and goal progress on well-being (i.e., SWB and relationship satisfaction). In a first step, relevant covariates (i.e., mean age and gender) and baseline actor and partner outcome measures (i.e., SWB or relationship satisfaction) were added to the model. Second, actor and partner relationship motivation were entered in the model. In a third and final step, actor and partner relationship and self-oriented goal progress were added to the model. Subsequently, we tested the mediating mechanism of relationship goal progress using parametric bootstrapping via the Monte Carlo Method to estimate the confidence intervals of the indirect effect (Selig & Preacher, 2008).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Descriptive analyses

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for and correlations between all key variables of this study. Participants' autonomous relationship motivation was positively associated with relationship and self-oriented goal progress at T2, as well as with SWB and relationship satisfaction at both time

**TABLE 1** Descriptive information of and correlations between key variables of the study

Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Actor relationship motivation (T1)	5.81 (3.24)	–								
2. Partner relationship motivation (T1)	5.81 (3.24)	.50***	–							
3. Actor relationship goal progress (T1–T2)	2.72 (1.04)	.24***	.16*	–						
4. Partner relationship goal progress (T1–T2)	2.72 (1.04)	.16*	.24***	.28**	–					
5. Actor self-oriented goal progress (T1–T2)	2.50 (1.04)	.21**	.19**	.35***	.09	–				
6. Partner self-oriented goal progress (T1–T2)	2.50 (1.04)	.19**	.21**	.09	.35***	.12	–			
7. Actor subjective well-being (T1)	.00 (0.76)	.45***	.30***	.29***	.15*	.21**	.16*	–		
8. Actor subjective well-being (T2)	.00 (0.76)	.45***	.32***	.48***	.28***	.28***	.14*	.73***	–	
9. Actor relationship satisfaction (T1)	3.18 (.68)	.71***	.43***	.29***	.15*	.08	.11	.54***	.48**	–
10. Actor relationship satisfaction (T2)	2.49 (.47)	.53***	.36***	.30***	.23**	.14*	.10	.32***	.43***	.62***

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

	Relationship goal progress				Self-oriented goal progress			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1								
Mean age	.00	.00	0.61	.53	.00	.00	0.71	.71
Gender	-.17	.12	-1.41	.16	-.26	.13	-1.90	.06
Model 2								
Actor relationship motivation	.09	.02	3.70	<.001	.05	.02	2.16	.03
Partner relationship motivation	.02	.02	0.78	.44	.05	.02	2.01	.05

**TABLE 2** APIMs examining effects of relationship motivation on relationship goal progress and self-oriented goal progress

points. Both relationship goal progress and self-oriented goal progress were positively associated with T2 SWB and T2 relationship satisfaction. There were strong positive associations between actor's and partner's relationship motivation, indicating a match within couples regarding their motivation for participating in the relationship.

Over the course of the year, participants made significantly more progress on their relationship goal ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than on their self-oriented goal ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $t(220) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .007$ ). On average, participants did not significantly change in their SWB ( $t(219) = .04$ ,  $p = .97$ ) over the course of the year. However, relationship satisfaction did decrease in the entire sample over the course of the study ( $M_{T1} = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .68$  vs.  $M_{T2} = 2.49$ ,  $SD = .47$ ;  $t(217) = 18.94$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).

## 4.2 | Main analyses

The first set of APIM analyses examined how each partner's relationship motivation was associated with relationship and

self-oriented goal progress (see Table 2). These analyses revealed that actor, but not partner, relationship motivation was positively associated with relationship goal progress. These results indicate that when actors felt relatively more autonomous than controlled about their romantic relationship, they made greater progress on their relationship goal. In addition, these results revealed that both actor and partner relationship motivation were positively associated with the actor's progress on the self-oriented goal.<sup>1</sup> These results suggest that actors made more goal progress on their self-oriented goals when both they and/or their partner felt relatively more autonomous than controlled about the relationship.

Next, we sought to examine the effects of actor and partner relationship motivation and goal progress on the changes in actor's SWB (see Table 3). Actor's SWB at baseline was a strong positive predictor of subsequent T2 actor SWB, while partner SWB at baseline was not significantly associated with change in actors' well-being. Moreover, actor's relationship motivation was positively associated with changes toward greater SWB, suggesting that the more autonomous the actor

**TABLE 3** APIMs examining the effects of relationship motivation and goal progress on changes in well-being and relationship satisfaction

	Actor subjective well-being (T2)				Actor relationship satisfaction (T2)			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1								
Actor Well-Being/ Satisfaction T1	.68	.05	14.15	<.01	.39	.04	9.39	<.01
Partner Well-Being/ Satisfaction T1	.05	.05	0.97	.33	.05	.04	1.32	.19
Mean age	.00	.00	0.91	.36	-.00	.00	-0.79	.43
Gender	-.04	.06	-0.62	.54	-.09	.04	-2.09	.04
Model 2								
Actor relationship motivation	.04	.01	2.68	.01	.02	.01	1.95	.05
Partner relationship motivation	.02	.01	1.90	.06	.01	.01	0.48	.64
Model 3								
Actor relationship goal progress	.17	.03	4.83	<.01	.05	.03	1.94	.05
Partner relationship goal progress	.07	.03	2.13	.04	.06	.03	2.28	.02
Actor self-oriented goal progress	.05	.03	1.45	.15	.01	.03	0.45	.65
Partner self-oriented goal progress	-.01	.03	-0.55	.58	-.00	.03	-0.03	.98

felt about the relationship, the greater increases in SWB they experienced. Finally, both actor and partner relationship goal progress were positively associated with increases in the actor's SWB, suggesting that both the actor's and the partner's progress toward their relationship goals benefited the actor's SWB. However, neither actor nor partner self-oriented goal progress was associated with changes in actor SWB. Of note, the effect of actor relationship motivation became non-significant ( $B = .02$   $SE = .01$ ,  $t = 1.89$ ,  $p = .06$ ) when the goal progress measures were added to the model. Follow-up parametric bootstrapping analyses conducted using the Monte Carlo Method (Selig & Preacher, 2008) found a significant indirect effect of actor autonomous motivation on T2 actor SWB through actor's relationship goal progress, Indirect effect (AB) = 0.015, 95% CI [0.006, 0.025], suggesting that actor's relationship goal progress mediated the association between actor's autonomous relationship motivation and change in actor's SWB. We did not find support for an indirect effect through partner's relationship goal progress, indirect effect (AB) = 0.001, 95% CI [-0.002, 0.006].

Finally, we sought to examine the effects of actor and partner relationship motivation and goal progress on the changes in actor's relationship satisfaction (see Table 3). The analyses demonstrated that actor baseline relationship satisfaction was positively associated with subsequent relationship satisfaction. We also found a gender effect, whereby females decreased more relative to males in their relationship satisfaction from T1 to T2. Furthermore, the analyses revealed that actor relationship motivation was positively associated with increases in actor's relationship satisfaction. Finally, we found that both actor's and partner's relationship goal progress contributed significantly to increases in actor's relationship satisfaction, while neither actor nor partner self-oriented goal progress contributed significantly to changes in actor relationship satisfaction. These results replicate previous research documenting the association between relationship motivation and relationship satisfaction, as well as highlight specific contribution of relationship, but not self-oriented goal progress in contributing to increased relationship satisfaction. Of note, actor relationship motivation became non-significant ( $B = .02$   $SE = .01$ ,  $t = 1.47$ ,  $p = .14$ ) when the goal progress measures were added to the model. A follow-up Monte Carlo test of the indirect effect of actor relationship motivation on relationship satisfaction through actor relationship goal progress was statistically significant Indirect effect (AB) = 0.005, 95% CI [0.00004, 0.011], suggesting that actor's relationship goal progress mediated the association between actor relationship motivation and change in actor's relationship satisfaction. Likewise, the indirect effect through partner's relationship goal progress was also significant, Indirect effect (AB) = 0.006, 95% CI [0.001, 0.012], suggesting that partner's relationship goal progress also mediated the association between actor relationship motivation and change in actor's relationship satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This study examined whether romantic partners' relationship motivation influenced their goal pursuit, SWB, and relationship satisfaction in the context of a prospective longitudinal study. Grounded in SDT's RMT, results showed that over the course of a year, actor's autonomous motivation for the relationship predicted goal progress on a relationship goal and a self-oriented personal goal. Partner's autonomous relationship motivation also predicted progress toward actor's self-oriented goal. Actor's autonomous motivation for the relationship was associated with increases in their SWB and relationship satisfaction over time. Moreover, both the actor's and the partner's relationship goal progress contributed significantly to increases in actor's SWB and relationship satisfaction, whereas neither actor's nor partner's progress on their self-oriented goal predicted change in actor's well-being or relationship satisfaction. Finally, relationship goal progress mediated the association between autonomous relationship motivation and increases in SWB and relationship satisfaction. Together, this pattern of results highlights the importance of relationship goal pursuit for enhanced well-being and satisfaction in romantic partners, and points to the motivational regulations that facilitate such goal progress.

### 5.1 | Relationship motivation and goal progress

The finding that actor's autonomous relationship motivation promoted relationship goal progress represents an important contribution to RMT. To date, studies examining RMT have shown that relationship autonomy contributes to positive relational behaviors (Blais et al., 1990), increased personal happiness in the relationship (Blais et al., 1990), greater understanding and reduced defensiveness in conflicts (Knee et al., 2005), increased relationship satisfaction (Knee et al., 2005), pro-relationship responses to partner transgressions (Hadden, Baker, & Knee, 2018), and higher quality caring and support (Hadden, Rodriguez, Knee, & Porter, 2015). This study extended the benefits of relationship autonomy in romantic couples to greater progress in the pursuit of relationship goals.

In support of TGD, our results revealed that autonomous relationship motivation also carried benefits that extended beyond actor's relationship goal progress. Indeed, we found that actor's autonomous relationship motivation also enhanced progress for self-oriented goals, suggesting that autonomous motivation for participating in the romantic relationship allowed actors to progress on multiple goals set in the relational context—both in the relationship domain and beyond. Moreover, we found that partner's autonomous relationship motivation was positively associated with actor's progress toward her or his self-oriented goal. Thus, when partners feel



autonomous about being in the relationship, actors appear to progress on other personal goals they set for themselves. One way to explain this finding is that self-oriented goals tend to require interpersonal supports (Fitzsimons et al., 2015). In addition, recent research suggests that receiving autonomous support for one's goals seems to be especially helpful (Gettens, Carbonneau, Koestner, Powers, & Gorin, 2018; Koestner, Powers, Carbonneau, Milyavskaya, & Chua, 2012). In this regard, we suspect that partners who felt autonomous about the relationship were more likely to bolster their partner's goal pursuit with autonomy support, a form of support that involves empathic perspective taking (e.g., Koestner et al., 2012). To examine this possibility more directly, future studies should include measures of provision of autonomy support as well as perceived autonomy support from the partner.

Interestingly, our study showed that the partner effect for relationship motivation only emerged for the actor's self-oriented goal, and not for the actor's relationship goal. This finding certainly warrants future research about the determining factors, which cannot be identified with data from the present study. It may be the case that partners have more difficulty being autonomy supportive for goals that directly implicate them (e.g., relationship goals). In other words, when the actor sets a relationship goal that requires effort or change from the partner, the partner may be more likely to monitor the actors' progress (Carver & Scheier, 2008) and provide directive support (i.e., positive guidance, problem solving, and cheerleading), which has been shown to be less helpful than autonomy support. For example, receiving autonomy support from a relationship partner predicted weight loss over a year in the context of a randomized controlled weight loss intervention study (Gorin, Powers, Koestner, Wing, & Raynor, 2014). In contrast, direct encouragement of healthy eating by partners was significantly negatively related to weight loss over the year.

Another implication of this study for SDT research is the importance of studying goal pursuit in the broader contexts of individuals' lives. Given the finding that relationship goal pursuit and affective outcomes will likely be impacted by the pursuer's relationship motivation, it may be important to assess relationship status and relationship motives when studying ideographic goals. However, other relationship factors may also play a role in the success of goal pursuit and should be explored in future studies. For example, pursuing some goals, such as career goals (Holding, St. Jacques, Verner-Filion, Kachanoff & Koestner, 2019), may require making sacrifices for the relationship (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005), which could involve possible drawbacks for making progress with self-oriented goals.

## 5.2 | Relationship motivation, goal progress and SWB

The study's results further showed that relationship goal progress resulted in enhanced reports of well-being. This finding is

consistent with prior research demonstrating that people's ability to pursue their goals is directly linked to their SWB (Diener, 1984; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). The effect of relationship goal progress on SWB is also consistent with the "cruise control" model of affect (Carver & Scheier, 2000) which suggests that making goal progress gives rise to positive affect, whereas goal stagnation gives rise to negative affect. Importantly, our findings confirmed that goal progress mediated the effect of relationship autonomy on increased SWB. Thus, a further novel contribution of this paper is identifying goal progress an important mediator, linking autonomous relationship motivation and well-being in a relationship context.

A broader implication for the goal pursuit literature is that this study expands upon the second central RMT proposition: "High quality relationships are facilitated not only by having close and enduring social contact with a partner but also by experiencing autonomous motivation within and for that contact. Autonomous motivation [...] contributes to high satisfaction and greater psychological wellness in both parties within that dyad" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 298). Indeed, by testing the indirect effects, we found that relationship goal striving within romantic couples represents a pathway through which autonomous relationship motivation enhances personal well-being. The finding that relationship goal progress mediated the association between autonomous relationship motivation and changes in SWB also carries implications for SDT goal pursuit research by expanding the self-concordance model of healthy goal striving (Sheldon, 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). The self-concordance model of goal striving proposes that when people pursue goals that are concordant with their inner values, beliefs and interests (i.e., high autonomous and low controlled motivation), they tend to make greater progress with important goals and experience increased well-being (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). Our study, along with recent research by Gore, Hester, Spegal, Kavanaugh, and Nakai (2018), provides empirical evidence to suggest that the self-concordance model can be applied to relationship goals adopted in the context of a long-term romantic relationship. We found that individuals who experienced "relationship concordance," that is people who felt agentic and authentic about their romantic relationship, made increased progress on their relationship goal, which in turn lead to an increase in personal well-being.

An important difference of our study, compared with previous self-concordance research (e.g., Sheldon & Elliot, 1998; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), is that we assessed motivation at the level of the relationship and not at the level of the specific goal. We believe that since the romantic relationship encompasses a specific domain (Gagné & Lydon, 2001), and the goals in question were domain-specific, assessing motivation at that level of the relationship is appropriate and captures significant variance of relationship goal progress. However, the fact that goal-specific motivation

was not assessed represents a limitation of the present study. Future research should explore whether there are meaningful differences between an individual's motivation for the relationship and motivation for specific relationship goals. While one might expect general relationship motivation and relationship goal motivation to correlate highly, the same way general orientations toward autonomy correlate highly with autonomous engagement in daily activities (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012), it is conceivable that individuals may experience mismatches in their motivation for the relationship and goals adopted in the context of the relationship. For example, a person who feels whole-hearted about participating in their romantic relationship may still experience feelings of pressure and control regarding a specific relationship goal that is not in line with their inner values or interests. Importantly, the impact of relationship motivation on self-oriented goal progress needs to be confirmed when actor's goal-specific motives are accounted for. As such, future research is needed to understand the extent to which relationship motivation predicts variance over-and-above goal-specific motivation for outcomes such as goal progress, SWB, and relationship satisfaction.

Relatedly, future studies would also benefit from assessing participants' relationally autonomous reasons in goal pursuit (RARs; Gore, Bowman, Grosse, & Justice, 2016; Gore & Cross, 2006; Gore, Cross, & Kanagawa, 2009; Gore et al., 2018). Relationally autonomous reasons in the pursuit of goals are based on the needs, desires, and commitments within a close relationship and emphasize the involvement of the "we" in goal pursuit. In other words, relationally autonomous reasons for goal pursuit represent a desire to attain outcomes that are in the interest of both members of a relationship or of the relationship itself. While a personally autonomous reason for goal pursuit may be "I am pursuing this goal because it is fun and interesting," a relationally autonomous reason for goal pursuit may be "I am pursuing this goal because the people involved make it fun and enjoyable" (see Gore & Cross, 2006; Gore et al., 2016, 2018). In this way, relationally autonomous reasons for goal pursuit serve a distinct and important function in energizing people to act on their goal beyond that of personally autonomous reasons for goal pursuit (Gore et al., 2018).

### 5.3 | Relationship motivation, goal progress, and relationship satisfaction

The present findings replicate result from Blais et al.'s (1990) in a prospective longitudinal study by indicating that actor's relationship motivation was associated with increases in actor relationship satisfaction. Moreover, both actor's and partner's relationship goal progress mediated the positive association between relationship autonomy and relationship satisfaction. This finding extends recent evidence linking goal progress

to increased relationship satisfaction in a 1-year longitudinal study. Hofmann et al. (2015) demonstrated that romantic partners who were more (vs. less) successful at achieving goals during a 1-week period showed a greater before to-after increase in satisfaction with their partner. Our study provides evidence to suggest that autonomous relationship motivation is a possible antecedent of relationship goal progress and subsequent increases in relationship satisfaction. That being said, future experimental research is needed to replicate this finding and explore the possibility that the links between autonomous relationship motivation, relationship goal progress, and relationship satisfaction may be bidirectional and dynamic, with increases in relationship satisfaction enhancing progress on relationship goals and autonomous relationship motivation. For example, Hofmann and colleagues (2015) also demonstrated that relationship satisfaction enhanced goal progress due to dyadic members' increased positive affect and perceived support, among other factors.

Finally, we acknowledge that, consistent with a robust body of work (e.g., Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2014; Mitnick, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2009; Murray et al., 2011), romantic dyads in our study decreased in relationship satisfaction over the course of the study. In this regard, a further contribution of the present work points to a possibility that autonomous relationship motivation and progress on relationship goals may buffer against the widely documented tendency for satisfaction in the relationship to decrease over time (see Huston et al., 2001).

### 5.4 | Limitations

This study was not without limitations. Two major limitations of this study were the reliance on self-report data and the fact that participants' ethnicity was not assessed. Collecting data on participant ethnicity would have been important to examine the generalizability of the present findings across different ethnicities and cultural groups. In addition, it would have allowed us to make predictions about the proportion of couples in the study that saw themselves as two individualized and separated units in the relationship ("me" and "you") versus seeing themselves as an integrated unit ("we") (e.g., Gore et al., 2009). Furthermore, our measurement of goal progress was coarse and future research may benefit from a more detailed assessment of goal progress (e.g., informant reports), as well as a baseline measurement of goal progress to better capture change in progress over time. It will also be important for future research to establish the extent to which perceptions of goal progress reflect actual goal progress, as some individuals may have higher standards for goal progress than others.

The content of relationship goals may also be important for future studies to explore. Consider, for example, the goal of "having a child in the near future." This goal

implicates both dyadic partners, but, ideally, would not be a goal aimed at improving the relationship, given the widely documented associations between transitions to parenthood and decreased relationship satisfaction (e.g., Meijer & van den Wittenboer, 2007; Mitnick et al., 2009). Likewise, the extent to which partners' efforts with a goal are likely to yield the desired outcome may also be important to consider, with some, goals such as "having a child in the near future," relying on biological factors and luck to a certain extent. Future research should also address the mechanisms underlying the associations we established in this study, preferably with an experimental design or intensive longitudinal data to confirm the directionality of effects. In this study, we proposed relationship goal progress as one mediator through which motivation quality enhances SWB, but other mechanisms may be at play. Future studies might benefit from assessing more than one relational goal, so that researchers can examine within and between person differences to establish the relative power of motivation at the level of the relationship versus at the level of the goal in predicting relational goal progress and adjustment outcomes (e.g., Holding et al., 2017; Milyavskaya et al., 2015).

Finally, future research is needed to understand how partners cope with relational goal pursuit that is not fruitful. Previous research has highlighted how the pursuit of unattainable goals can compromise health and well-being (for a review, see Wrosch, Scheier, & Miller, 2013). Autonomous relationship motivation may only be beneficial to relationship goals to the extent that an individual's goals are realistic and achievable. Individuals may disengage from a relationship goal if the goal becomes too costly, or the ideal time-window for pursuing the relationship goal has elapsed (e.g., disengaging from the goal of having children in later adulthood; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001). Once romantic partners are confronted with blocked goals, it would be interesting to understand how relationship motivation impacts goal disengagement. Preliminary research suggests that autonomous motivation may facilitate disengagement from identity-relevant goals for which the ideal time-frame for achievement has elapsed (i.e., athletic retirement, Holding, Fortin, Carpentier, Hope, Koestner, 2018).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In the context of a dyadic longitudinal investigation, this study demonstrated that: (1) relationship autonomy is an important predictor of relationship goal progress and self-oriented goal progress, (2) progress on relationship goals by both the actor and the partner is associated with increased SWB and improved relationship satisfaction, and (3) relationship goal progress mediates the association between autonomous

relationship motivation and SWB as well as autonomous relationship motivation and relationship satisfaction. These results highlight the important interplay between relationship motivation, goal striving, and domain-specific and global wellness, and provide novel evidence for the benefits of autonomous relationship motivation. This research bodes well for romantic partners who feel whole-hearted and intrinsically motivated to sustain their romantic relationship. However, for individuals whose own reasons for being in a relationship feel disingenuous, inauthentic, or instrumental, this research suggests that there may be emotional costs over time.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

## ORCID

Anne C. Holding  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4520-5240>

Richard Koestner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8416-0057>

Carsten Wrosch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8845-2260>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The pattern of effects remains the same when the covariates of age and gender are removed from the models, although some of the effects are rendered marginally significant. Specifically, actor's autonomous relationship motivation on self-oriented goal progress becomes marginal when age and gender are not controlled for ( $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t = 1.90$ ,  $p = .069$ ). Likewise, the effect of partner relationship motivation on self-oriented goal progress becomes marginal without the inclusion of age and gender ( $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t = 1.91$ ,  $p = .058$ ). Finally, the effect of actor's autonomous motivation on changes in actor's relationship satisfaction becomes marginal when gender and age are not controlled for ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = 1.90$ ,  $p = .059$ ).



<sup>2</sup> In light of questions that emerged during the review process regarding the potential for an interaction effect between actor and partner relationship motivation or differences in effects depending on the nature of particular goals, we provide information about the various exploratory analyses that were conducted. We did not find a significant interaction effect for actor and partner relationship motivation for any of the outcomes. We coded for whether partners reported matching relationship goals, finding that 35% of the dyadic members in our study had spontaneously nominated the same relationship goal as their partner. Even when we split the file to analyze the subsample of dyads who reported the same relationship goal, we did not find a significant interaction for relationship motivation. We also coded the relationship goals for whether they required effort/change solely on behalf of the actor (e.g., “be more attentive to my husband”) or joint effort/change of both partners (e.g., “start a family together”). In our sample, 38% of relationship goals were found to require individual effort/change by the actor, whereas 57%, the majority, of relationship goals required joint effort/change from both partners (5% of goals were coded as ambiguous). We conducted our APIMs separately for relationship goals that required individual effort/change, and relationship goals that required joint effort/change to see if different relationship motivation effects would emerge. Even when only considering progress on relationship goals that required joint actor/partner input, we did not find a significant partner relationship motivation effect. Conversely, the positive effect of actor relationship motivation for progress on goals that involved joint effort/change remained significant. The effect of actor relationship motivation on relationship goal progress was not enhanced when only considering relationship goals that required the actors’ own effort/change.”

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