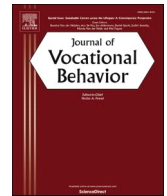




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# How romantic relationships affect individual career goal attainment: A transactive goal dynamics perspective<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of career goals for career self-management, we know little about the self-regulatory processes underlying career goal attainment. In this study, we draw on transactive goal dynamics theory to investigate whether and how romantic relationships impact career goal attainment. For testing our research model, we focused on the career goal of being successful in a political election, and gathered survey and objective data from politicians at three measurement points ( $N = 108$ ). As hypothesized, our path analysis showed that relationship closeness facilitated career goal attainment through shared career goals and an increase in the available shared pool of resources. We further explored the moderating role of goal coordination in this process, and found that a high goal conflict undermined the indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment whereas goal facilitation had no moderating effect. Finally, we found no support for the hypothesized effect of relationship duration on shared career goals and career goal attainment. Our findings indicate that romantic relationships can facilitate career goal attainment and that partners' goal coordination is a relevant boundary condition of this process. Our study thus highlights the value of integrating career research and work-home research. Practically, our results imply that individuals should gain their partner's support for their career goals, and that supervisors can facilitate employees' career development by enabling them to capitalize on home-domain resources such as their romantic relationship. According to our findings, career counselors can assist their clients' career self-management by preventing goal conflicts with their partner.

Margaret Thatcher served eleven years as UK Prime Minister and was one of the most powerful politicians in the 20th century. Despite being nicknamed the *Iron Lady*, she publicly highlighted the importance of her husband Denis for her political career: "I couldn't have done it without Denis. He was a fund of shrewd advice and penetrating comment" (McKittrick, 2013). Thus, it seems that Thatcher's husband contributed considerably to the attainment of her career goals. Career goals define the "desirable end states" a person is striving for in their career (Papies & Aarts, 2011, p. 127). They provide specific aims, trigger the development of action plans and career strategies, and facilitate the monitoring of one's progress (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Kaplan, 1995). While the predictors of

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career success are well-researched, few studies investigate the setting and pursuit of career goals (Greco & Kraimer, 2020). Consequently, we know little about the processes underlying the attainment of career goals and how they are influenced by home-domain factors, such as the romantic relationship.

This study aims to answer the question of whether and how the romantic relationship affects career goal attainment. To this end, we draw on theorizing about self-regulatory processes in social relationships. Transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015) postulates that two individuals in a relationship may be interdependent in their goal pursuit, and that this interdependence can promote goal attainment. Based on the theory's proposition that relationship characteristics affect the level of interdependence, we examine the effects of relationship duration and closeness on career goal attainment, as well as their underlying mechanisms. More precisely, we investigate two mediators: the extent to which a partner shares an individual's career goal and the available shared pool of resources. Moreover, we test if the coordination of one's own career goal with the partner's goals moderates this process. To investigate our research questions, we gathered survey and objective data from politicians, which enabled us to focus on a particular and time-bound career goal that is relevant to all participants (i.e., to achieve a large proportion of votes in an election). This approach also allowed us to objectively assess and meaningfully compare career goal attainment.

Our study makes three important contributions. First, we address the determinants of career goal attainment, an understudied topic which is highly relevant for career development. Understanding the determinants of career goal attainment is crucial, because attaining the specific goals an individual strives for in their career is a prerequisite for a positive evaluation of their career success (Greco & Kraimer, 2020; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Kaplan, 1995). Until now, most research has addressed the determinants of career goal attainment on a global level (e.g., when measuring career satisfaction) whereas we identify the factors that affect the attainment of a particular, contextualized career goal. This approach enables us to shed light on the processes underlying the attainment of a specific career goal and thereby generate novel insights into the question how individuals can achieve what they aim for in their careers. Thus, our findings also yield useful practical implications for individuals' career management.

Second, by exploring how romantic relationships affect career goal attainment we advance the investigation of careers from a work-home perspective (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Hirschi, Herrmann, Nagy, & Spurk, 2016). Previous research suggests that home-domain factors such as the romantic relationship can considerably impact individuals' careers (e.g., Ocampo, Restubog, Liwag, Wang, & Petelczyc, 2018; Pluut, Büttgen, & Ullrich, 2018). Yet, it remains unclear how romantic relationships affect the self-regulatory processes underlying the attainment of career goals. Taking a transactive goal dynamics perspective (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015), our study provides first evidence about these processes and the moderating role of partners' goal coordination therein. We identify the extent to which a partner shares an individual's career goal and the available shared pool of resources as self-regulatory mechanisms that link romantic relationships with career goal attainment. In so doing, our study also contributes to the integration of career research and self-regulation research.

Finally, we test the core propositions of transactive goal dynamics theory in the context of career goal attainment. The theory explicates self-regulatory processes in social relationships and can thus complement existing theoretical frameworks about career self-management that address individual self-regulation (e.g., Greenhaus, Callanan, & Kaplan, 1995; Hirschi, Zacher, & Shockley, 2020; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). We conduct a first empirical test of the theory's proposition that a high self-regulatory interdependency in romantic relationships results in favorable goal outcomes through an increase in the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit, and that goal coordination moderates this process. Thereby, we assess the theory's validity within the context of career goal attainment and provide a first indication for the usefulness of adopting the theory in other contexts.

## 1. How romantic relationships enrich careers

Previous research on the work-home interface has provided evidence that home-domain factors such as the romantic relationship can enrich individuals' work experiences and careers. Home-to-work enrichment describes the spillover<sup>1</sup> of positive experiences from the home domain to the work domain, for instance when resources (e.g., skills or positive emotions) generated at home are carried over to the work domain (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Expanding on these spillover processes, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) propose in their work-home resources model that home-to-work enrichment occurs when resources from the home domain (e.g., partner support) are translated into personal resources (e.g., energy, self-efficacy) which, in turn, facilitate performance in the work domain. Accordingly, a recent meta-analysis has shown that home-to-work enrichment positively affects various outcomes in the work domain, including job performance and organizational commitment (Zhang, Xu, Jin, & Ford, 2018). The work-home resources model further suggests that the romantic relationship is a crucial source of home-domain resources and can thus enrich individuals' work experiences and careers. In line with this assumption, studies have provided evidence that receiving partner support is related to several desirable work and career-related outcomes, such as reduced employee turnover (Huffman, Casper, & Payne, 2014) as well as improved job satisfaction and career success (Ferguson, Carlson, Kacmar, & Halbesleben, 2016; Ocampo, Restubog, Liwag, Wang, & Petelczyc, 2018). Taken together, these findings show that an individual's romantic relationship can enrich their work experiences and careers. Yet, it remains unclear how romantic relationships affect the self-regulatory processes underlying the attainment of career goals. In the following, we draw on theorizing from self-regulation research to develop our research model.

<sup>1</sup> Resources may not only spill over from one domain to the other within one individual (i.e., intra-individual spillover), but can also be transmitted from one partner to the other (i.e., inter-individual crossover). We delimit our literature review to intra-individual spillover, because our research model does not include crossover effects (see Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018, for a review of resource crossover in couples).

## 2. The interdependence of self-regulation in romantic relationships

Self-regulation research has shown that other individuals within the social environment, such as romantic partners, can influence individual self-regulation and goal attainment (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010). Transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015) provides a useful framework for explicating the self-regulatory processes occurring within social relationships, such as the pursuit of a career goal. The theory's main assumption is that the self-regulatory systems of two individuals in a social relationship are interlinked. The theory further proposes that dyads differ in the extent to which the self-regulatory systems of partners are interdependent, with higher interdependence referring to "numerous and strong links among members' goals, pursuits, and outcomes" (Fitzsimons et al., 2015, p. 650). When two individuals in a relationship are highly interdependent, they pursue their goals as self-regulatory unit. Consequently, individuals may not only pursue goals that are self-oriented, but also goals that are related to their partner or to the dyad as a whole. When both partners in a relationship have one specific goal for one of the partners, this constitutes a shared target-oriented goal (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Our study focuses on *shared career goals*—career goals that are targeted at one partner and held by both partners. For instance, biographical accounts allude to Denis Thatcher sharing Margaret Thatcher's goal to become Prime Minister of the UK, as he supported her political ambitions from the beginning of their relationship (Moore, 2013). Thus, Margaret and Denis Thatcher had a shared career goal that was targeted at her (i.e., that she would become Prime Minister of the UK). Having a shared career goal signals high self-regulatory interdependence, as both partners hold the same goal for one of them, and both can contribute to career goal attainment by allocating resources to goal pursuit (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015).

According to transactive goal dynamics theory, shared goals emerge in a relationship if partners have opportunities and motivation to develop a high goal interdependence. Time spent together in a relationship is postulated to be a major determinant of opportunities: The longer two partners have been in a relationship together, the higher the quantity of interaction (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001). Consequently, long-term partners have had more opportunities to learn about each other's goals and to develop shared goals (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Moreover, the motivation to share a partner's goal should be strongly related to relationship closeness (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Relationship closeness is conceptualized as the degree of *inclusion of other in the self*, meaning that, in a close relationship, the partner is part of one's self-concept and the partner's perspectives and characteristics are adopted as one's own (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Individuals who are in a close relationship usually indicate high identity overlap with their partner and show a high level of cognitive interdependence (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Consequently, in a close relationship, the partners should be more aware of each other's goals and more willing to adopt these goals as their own (Shah, 2003). This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Relationship duration (H1a) and relationship closeness (H1b) are positively associated with shared career goals.

## 3. The role of the available shared pool of resources

Transactive goal dynamics theory proposes that a high self-regulatory interdependence results in improved goal outcomes by increasing "the shared pool of resources" (Fitzsimons et al., 2015, p. 658) available for goal pursuit, which consists of the resources the individual and their partner jointly allocate to the pursuit of the shared career goal. The theory suggests that if the partner shares an individual's goal, they should make more personal resources available for goal pursuit, thereby increasing the shared pool of resources. Similarly, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) propose in their work-home resources model that when experiencing home-to-work enrichment, individuals may also benefit from resources that originate from the social context they are embedded in. For instance, when partners offer volatile resources such as time, energy, or money, the individual receives social support—a key contextual resource contributing to successful goal attainment. So far, there has been no attempt to test the proposition of transactive goal dynamics theory that having a shared career goal should result in an increased shared pool of resources. Yet, existing empirical evidence suggests that individuals will more likely experience their partner's success as their own when there is a high degree of overlap between them (Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004), and that in situations with a high interdependence, individuals rather engage in behaviors that are beneficial for their partner (Columbus, Molho, Righetti, & Balliet, 2020). These findings imply that when interdependence is high and the partner shares an individual's career goal, they should be more willing to invest their own personal resources for the pursuit of this shared career goal, resulting in an increased shared pool of resources:

**Hypothesis 2.** Shared career goals are positively related to the available shared pool of resources.

In line with the definition of resources as "anything perceived by the individual to help attain his or her goals" (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014, p. 1338), transactive goal dynamics theory suggests that individuals are more successful in attaining their career goals when they have a large shared pool of resources available. Previous research has provided broad evidence that acquiring and utilizing resources generally helps individuals attain their goals and perform well (Moghimi, Zacher, Scheibe, & Van Yperen, 2017). For example, a meta-analysis found that work-related resources such as self-efficacy, social support, autonomy, and a high-quality relationship with the supervisor were positively related to employees' performance (Nielsen et al., 2017). Moreover, numerous studies have shown that volatile energy resources are a key determinant of performance (e.g., den Kamp, Tims, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2018; Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016; Xia, Wang, Song, Zhang, & Qian, 2019). Based on this empirical evidence and the theoretical assumptions of transactive goal dynamics theory, we hypothesize that having a large pool of shared resources results in an improved goal outcome:

**Hypothesis 3.** The available shared pool of resources is positively related to career goal attainment.

#### 4. Goal coordination as boundary condition for career goal attainment

Transactional goal dynamics theory further proposes that the partners' goal coordination plays a crucial role in the self-regulatory processes underlying goal attainment (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Romantic partners pursue multiple goals and vary in the degree of coordination between them (Gere & Schimmack, 2013). Riediger and Freund (2004) identified two dimensions of goal coordination: goal conflict and goal facilitation. *Goal conflict* occurs when the pursuit of one goal impedes the attainment of another goal, because both goals compete for the same resource or the behaviors involved in the respective goal pursuits are incompatible. *Goal facilitation* occurs when the pursuit of one goal simultaneously promotes the attainment of another goal.

Low goal conflict and high goal facilitation *within* individuals promote goal attainment and better well-being (Tomasik, Knecht, & Freund, 2017). Likewise, studies focusing on goal coordination *in couples* have found that engaging in activities that facilitate both partners' goals is linked to an improved well-being (Gere, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2011). In contrast, goal conflict in couples reduces the motivation to help one's partner (Kindt, Vansteenkiste, Cano, & Goubert, 2017) and relates to poorer well-being and relationship quality (Gere & Schimmack, 2013; Righetti, Gere, Hofmann, Visserman, & Van Lange, 2016). Moreover, Columbus, Molho, Righetti, and Balliet (2020) allude to goal conflict attenuating the positive effects of relationship interdependence on activities that benefit the partner's goal pursuit. Thus, the coordination of an individual's career goal with their partner's other goals should play a central role in the processes underlying career goal attainment. More precisely, transactional goal dynamics theory suggests that partners will only be able to capitalize on a high self-regulatory interdependence when their goals are coordinated well, because a good goal coordination in terms of low goal conflict and high goal facilitation enables the partners to efficiently use their shared pool of resources (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015). Taken together, we propose that goal coordination is a crucial boundary condition for the indirect effects of relationship duration and relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goal and the available pool of shared resources. Our research model thus describes a moderated serial mediation for which we propose the following two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 4.** Goal coordination moderates the serial mediation of relationship duration on career goal attainment through shared career goals and the available shared pool of resources: The indirect effect is stronger for partners with lower (vs. higher) goal conflict (H4a) and for partners with higher (vs. lower) goal facilitation (H4b).

**Hypothesis 5.** Goal coordination moderates the serial mediation of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goals and the available shared pool of resources: The indirect effect is stronger for partners with lower (vs. higher) goal conflict (H5a) and for partners with higher (vs. lower) goal facilitation (H5b).

#### 5. Method

##### 5.1. Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a two-wave online survey in Germany with politicians who ran for the federal parliament or for a state parliament in Bavaria, Hesse, and Lower Saxony. At the third wave, we gathered objective data on election results. With this approach, we not only reduced a potential common-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), but we could also make sure that results were comparable as participants held the *same* goal at the *same* time for their career (i.e., achieving a large proportion of votes).

Three months prior to the respective elections, we recruited candidates running for the six largest German parties for our study ( $N = 274$ ). After providing informed consent to participate in the study, the candidates received a link to a survey eight weeks (T1) and four weeks (T2) prior to the election (T3). At T1, we measured relationship duration, relationship closeness, and shared career goals. Moreover, we assessed participant demographics at T1. At T2, we assessed the shared pool of resources as well as goal coordination. Lastly, we added objective data about the candidates' election results to assess career goal attainment at T3.

##### 5.2. Sample

At T1, 237 candidates (i.e., 86.5%) filled in the survey, and at T2, 208 candidates (i.e., 75.9%) filled in the survey. For our analyses, we considered candidates who indicated that they were in a romantic relationship and provided data for all study variables ( $N = 115$ , corresponding to 42.0% of those who registered for the study). Following Aguinis, Gottfredson, and Joo (2013), we checked our data for outliers applying multiple criteria (i.e., Mahalanobi's distance, studentized deleted residuals, DFFITS, DFBETAS, Cook's  $D$ ) and excluded seven cases that were consistently identified as outliers, resulting in a final sample of 108 candidates.

The candidates were on average 43.94 years old ( $SD = 12.42$ ), the majority of whom were male (69.4%). Most candidates were employed (54.7%) or self-employed (25.5%). In total, 64.9% of the candidates were married. The majority of them had at least one child (62.0%) and 40.7% of the candidates were living with at least one child. For most of the candidates, it was their first candidacy (77.8%), and they had an average campaign team size of 6.37 persons ( $SD = 4.12$ ). Our sample includes politicians from the six largest German parties (i.e., 25.9% greens, 25.0% liberals, 23.1% social-democrats, 12.0% far-left, 8.3% far-right, and 5.6% conservatives).

##### 5.3. Measures

The survey was conducted in German. The first author translated the scales originally published in English into German. Then

another member of the research team translated these scales back into English to ensure that the translation maintained the item content (Brislin, 1970). Both translators were highly proficient in English and German.

### 5.3.1. Relationship duration

At T1, we assessed relationship duration in years with one item (i.e., “How long have you been in a relationship with your partner?”).

### 5.3.2. Relationship closeness

We used Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, and Gerchak’s (2004) scale to measure relationship closeness at T1 consisting of four items (e.g., “I feel very interconnected with my partner”). We used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.72.

### 5.3.3. Shared career goals

Because there was no established scale available, we used the item “My partner and I share the goal of my candidacy being successful” to assess shared career goals at T1. Single items can be a reliable way to measure constructs on a general level (Nagy, 2002; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), and are frequently used to assess goal appraisals such as goal difficulty, goal commitment, goal importance, or goal progress (e.g., Hyvönen, Feldt, Salmela-Aro, Kinnunen, & Mäkikangas, 2009; Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Aunola, 2009; Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Koivisto, 2002; Righetti, Kumashiro, & Campbell, 2014). The item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### 5.3.4. Shared pool of resources

Based on Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker’s (2012) resource taxonomy, we assessed time, energy, and money available for the candidacy to serve as causal indicators for the shared pool of resources at T2 (see Bollen & Bauldry, 2011). The candidates rated three respective items (e.g., “How much energy do you and your partner have for your candidacy?”) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*very much*). We then built an index for the shared pool of resources. In contrast to reflective effect indicators, causal indicators are seen as the *cause* of the latent variable they are intended to measure (i.e., shared pool of resources). Therefore, the indicators do not necessarily correlate with each other, and composite reliability estimates such as Cronbach’s Alpha are not meaningful (Bollen & Bauldry, 2011).

### 5.3.5. Goal coordination

To assess goal conflict and goal facilitation at T2, we adapted the Intergoal Relations Questionnaire (Riediger & Freund, 2004). First, we asked the candidates to identify one or more goals their partner was currently pursuing. These goals were mostly related to politics (e.g., promoting a political party), the partner’s job or career (e.g., finishing a project at work), family (e.g., providing good childcare), health (e.g., regularly doing sports), or the romantic relationship (e.g., spending more time with each other). Next, the candidates rated four items indicating how much these goals overall conflicted with their candidacy (e.g., “How often can it happen that, because of your partner’s goals, you do not invest as much time into your candidacy as you would like to?”), and two items indicating how much these goals overall facilitated their candidacy (e.g., “The pursuit of my partner’s goals sets the stage for the realization of my goal of a successful candidacy”). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) and from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) respectively. Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.63 for goal conflict and 0.74 for goal facilitation.

### 5.3.6. Career goal attainment

At T3, we gathered the publicly available election results from the German federal statistical office and the respective state statistical offices. For each candidate, we added information about the percentage of votes they achieved in their electoral district to the survey data to assess career goal attainment. To account for the specificities of the German electoral system, we used the percentage of votes achieved rather than the dichotomous variable of being elected. In the German electoral system, being elected is strongly linked with party membership. That is, candidates of smaller parties rarely achieve the relative majority of votes in their constituency to be directly elected for parliament. However, a large proportion of votes will strengthen their position in the party and facilitate their political career. Therefore, we consider the percentage of votes achieved in the election as the most adequate measure for career goal attainment in this context.

## 5.4. Control variables

We included the control variables candidates’ age in years, their gender (0 = male, 1 = female), and the average of votes their party received in the respective election in our analyses. First, age is related to relationship duration while at the same time affecting election success. Voters may perceive older candidates more favorably because political experience increases with age, and older individuals score higher on personality traits such as emotional stability and conscientiousness (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Moreover, gender stereotypes ascribe males more agentic characteristics (e.g., Heilman, 2012), which might lead voters to consider males (vs. females) as more suitable candidates, resulting in a higher career goal attainment. These stereotypes might also increase the probability that their partner will respond to their needs and provide them with resources for goal pursuit. Finally, to investigate the candidates’ goal attainment independently from their party’s election success, we controlled for the average percentage of votes their party achieved in their federal state excluding the electoral district of the respective candidate.

### 5.5. Construct validity

To ensure that the constructs measured at the same points in time showed discriminant validity, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). For the constructs assessed at T1 we did not conduct a CFA, because relationship closeness was the only multi-item scale, while relationship duration and shared career goal were measured with one item, and conducting a CFA with single-item measures is not feasible (Marsh, Hau, Balla, & Grayson, 1998). For T2, a CFA with goal conflict and goal facilitation revealed sufficient discriminant validity as the two-factor model ( $\chi^2_{(df=8)} = 10.90, p = 0.208, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.06$ ) fit the data better than the one-factor solution ( $\chi^2_{(df=9)} = 53.12, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.66, RMSEA = 0.22, SRMR = 0.14; \Delta\chi^2_{(\Delta df=1)} = 42.22, p < 0.001$ ). At T3, we measured only one construct (i.e., career goal attainment).

## 6. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations between the study variables. To test our research model, we conducted a path analysis with the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). The model comprised all hypothesized paths as displayed in Fig. 1. Because relationship characteristics and shared goal representations likely affect partners' goal coordination (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015), we added paths from relationship closeness and duration as well as from shared career goal to the moderators goal conflict and goal facilitation.

Fig. 1 provides an overview of our path analysis results, and Table 2 shows more detailed results including the effects of control variables. Inspection of the fit indices revealed that overall, the fit of the model was acceptable ( $\chi^2_{(df=17)} = 39.08, p = 0.002, CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.11, SRMR = 0.07$ ), although the RMSEA indicated a rather poor model fit.<sup>2</sup> By adding regression paths from shared pool of resources to goal conflict and goal facilitation, the model fit improved and was acceptable according to all fit indices ( $\chi^2_{(df=15)} = 29.63, p = 0.013, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.07$ ). Because adding these paths did not affect the results, we report the findings of the original, more parsimonious model in the following.

Our path analysis showed that none of our control variables had an effect on shared career goal (gender:  $b = 0.33, p = 0.117$ , age:  $b = 0.00, p = 0.809$ , party average of votes:  $b = 0.01, p = 0.609$ ). Against our assumptions, relationship duration was not related to having a shared career goal ( $b = 0.00, p = 0.960$ ), thus we rejected Hypothesis 1a. In support of Hypothesis 1b, we found a positive effect of relationship closeness on having a shared career goal ( $b = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ); the closer the relationship, the more the partner shared the candidate's career goal. None of our control variables had an effect on the available shared pool of resources (gender:  $b = -0.19, p = 0.163$ , age:  $b = 0.00, p = 0.837$ , party average of votes:  $b = 0.01, p = 0.281$ ). In line with Hypothesis 2, we found a positive effect of having a shared career goal on the shared pool of resources ( $b = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), such that candidates with partners who shared their career goal indicated having more shared resources. Finally, we found that career goal attainment was not related to gender ( $b = 0.24, p = 0.716$ ) or age ( $b = 0.05, p = 0.129$ ), while the party average of votes was positively related to the percentage of votes the candidates achieved ( $b = 1.02, p < 0.001$ ). In line with Hypothesis 3, we further found that the shared pool of resources was positively related to career goal attainment ( $b = 1.47, p = 0.001$ ); candidates who had more shared resources available were more successful in attaining their career goal.

To test Hypothesis 4a and b, we first checked whether the indirect effect of relationship duration on career goal attainment through shared career goal and shared pool of resources was significant. Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), we computed bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect using 10'000 bootstrap samples. Due to the non-significant effect of relationship duration on shared career goal, the indirect effect of relationship duration on career goal attainment was not significant ( $b = 0.000, SE = 0.005, 95\% CI [-0.011, 0.011]$ ). To test whether the moderation of the indirect effect was significant, we then calculated the index of moderated mediation and bootstrapped confidence intervals for this index as described by Hayes (2015). The index of moderated mediation was neither significant for goal conflict (estimate =  $-0.0002, SE = 0.006, 95\% CI [-0.013, 0.010]$ ) nor for goal facilitation (estimate =  $0.00004, SE = 0.001, 95\% CI [-0.002, 0.004]$ ). Therefore, we rejected Hypothesis 4a and b.

To test Hypothesis 5a and b, we first analyzed whether the indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goal and shared pool of resources was significant. Our analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment ( $b = 0.211, SE = 0.109, 95\% CI [0.065, 0.510]$ ). Next, we calculated the index of moderated mediation, which was significant for goal conflict (estimate =  $-0.211, SE = 0.149, 95\% CI [-0.651, -0.016]$ ), but not for goal facilitation (estimate =  $0.031, SE = 0.053, 95\% CI [-0.056, 0.169]$ ). Thus, the indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goal and shared pool of resources was moderated by goal conflict, but not by goal facilitation. Our analysis of the conditional indirect effects showed that the indirect effect was significant for low ( $b = 0.345, SE = 0.177, 95\% CI = [0.113, 0.867]$ ) and medium ( $b = 0.211, SE = 0.106, 95\% CI = [0.070, 0.506]$ ) levels of goal conflict. Yet, this effect was not significant when goal conflict was high ( $b = 0.077, SE = 0.094, 95\% CI = [-0.074, 0.316]$ ). These results provided support for Hypothesis 5a, but not for Hypothesis 5b. Fig. 2 illustrates the conditional indirect effects for varying levels of goal conflict with a 95% confidence band.

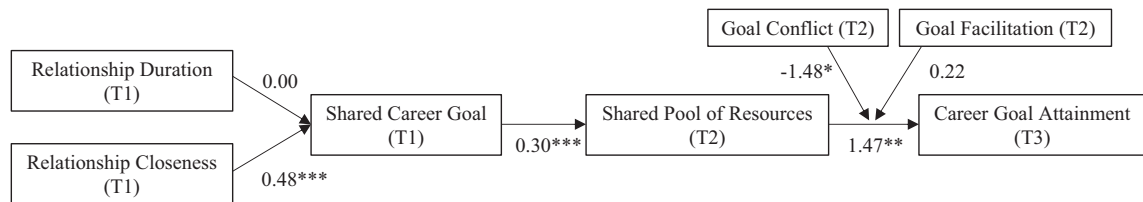
<sup>2</sup> Simulation studies have shown that in models with few degrees of freedom—which applies to our path model—the RMSEA is often inflated, especially when sample sizes are small (Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby, & Paxton, 2008; Kenny, Kaniskan, & McCoach, 2015). In this case, the RMSEA might exceed the cutoff-values for moderate or good fit even though the model is correctly specified.

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender <sup>a</sup> (T1)	0.31	–	–								
2. Age (T1)	43.94	12.42	–0.14	–							
3. Relationship duration (T1)	15.38	11.34	0.01	0.69	–						
4. Relationship closeness (T1)	3.57	0.74	–0.31	0.09	0.09	–					
5. Shared career goal (T1)	4.00	1.00	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.32	–				
6. Shared pool of resources (T2)	2.82	0.73	–0.15	0.17	0.20	0.35	0.47	–			
7. Goal conflict (T2)	2.03	0.63	–0.11	–0.14	–0.25	0.06	–0.37	–0.31	–		
8. Goal facilitation (T2)	2.93	1.16	–0.19	0.12	0.16	0.25	0.36	0.40	–0.14	–	
9. Party average of votes (T3)	12.39	8.34	0.07	0.07	0.12	0.07	0.08	0.14	–0.05	0.00	–
10. Career goal attainment (T3)	11.84	9.31	0.07	0.12	0.14	0.04	0.10	0.25	–0.11	0.09	0.94

Note: N = 108. T1, T2, and T3 refer to the three measurement time points. Correlations  $r \geq |0.19|$  are significant at  $p < 0.05$ , and correlations  $r \geq |0.31|$  are significant at  $p < 0.01$ , using two-sided tests.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = male, 1 = female.



**Fig. 1.** Simplified path analysis results.

Note. T1, T2, and T3 refer to the three measurement time points. All variables are self-report measures, except for career goal attainment which was measured objectively. The effects of control variables and the direct effects are omitted (see Table 2). Values displayed are unstandardized regression coefficients, and *p*-values are based on two-sided tests. Shared pool of resources, goal conflict, and goal facilitation are mean-centered. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , and \* $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 2**  
Path analysis results.

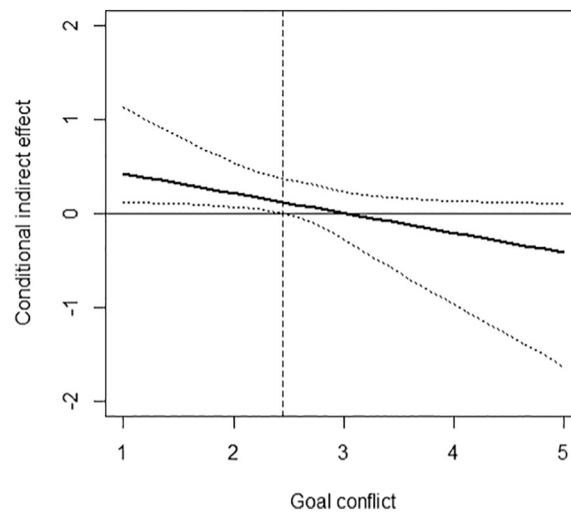
Variable	Shared career goal				Shared pool of resources				Career goal attainment			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender <sup>a</sup>	0.33	0.21	1.57	0.117	–0.19	0.14	–1.40	0.163	0.24	0.65	0.36	0.716
Age	0.00	0.01	0.24	0.809	0.00	0.01	0.21	0.837	0.05	0.03	1.51	0.129
Party average of votes	0.01	0.01	0.51	0.609	0.01	0.01	1.08	0.281	1.02	0.03	30.31	<0.001
Relationship closeness	0.48	0.13	3.75	<0.001	0.16	0.09	1.77	0.077	–0.74	0.44	–1.71	0.088
Relationship duration	0.00	0.01	0.05	0.960	0.01	0.01	1.22	0.224	–0.05	0.04	–1.28	0.200
Shared career goal					0.30	0.06	4.78	<0.001	–0.33	0.36	–0.92	0.358
Shared pool of resources									1.47	0.45	3.26	0.001
Goal conflict									–0.87	0.49	–1.77	0.077
Goal facilitation									0.58	0.26	2.24	0.025
Shared pool of resources × Goal conflict									–1.48	0.68	–2.18	0.029
Shared pool of resources × Goal facilitation									0.22	0.33	0.65	0.514
Variance explained	$R^2 = 0.13$				$R^2 = 0.31$				$R^2 = 0.91$			

Note: N = 108. Values displayed are unstandardized regression coefficients. Shared pool of resources, goal conflict, and goal facilitation are mean-centered. *P*-Values are based on two-sided tests.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = male, 1 = female.

## 7. Discussion

The main result of our study is that romantic relationships can enrich individuals' career goal attainment. In line with our hypotheses, participants were more likely to indicate that their partner shared their career goal when relationship closeness was high. Having a shared career goal, in turn, increased the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit, which had a positive effect on career goal attainment. We further found a significant indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goals and shared pool of resources. Our findings show that characteristics of romantic relationships are relevant for career goal attainment and underscore the importance of including home-domain factors in the study of individual careers (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Our results are in line with a growing body of research showing that significant others can affect individual self-regulation (e.g., Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2010) and provide empirical evidence for the processes underlying self-regulation in



**Fig. 2.** Conditional indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goal and shared pool of resources for varying levels of goal conflict.

Note: The figure shows the indirect effect and a bootstrapped 95% confidence band for varying levels of goal conflict. The dashed vertical line represents the boundary of the region of significance.

relationships as proposed by transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015).

Yet, being in a close relationship and having a partner who shares one's career goal is not enough. In line with transactive goal dynamics theory, our analyses revealed that goal coordination with the partner is a boundary condition for successful career goal attainment. Specifically, we found that a high goal conflict undermined the indirect effect of relationship closeness on career goal attainment through shared career goal and the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit. When goal conflict is high, the partners' goals compete for the same scarce resources within the couple (Kindt, Vansteenkiste, Cano, & Goubert, 2017), which should result in a reduced likelihood of allocating the resources to the pursuit of the shared career goal. Interestingly, we did not find that goal facilitation was a boundary condition for the process linking relationship closeness with career goal attainment. Taken together, our findings imply that it is important to prevent conflicts between one's own career goal and the partner's other goals for being able to capitalize on one's romantic relationship and effectively use the shared pool of resources in the pursuit of career goals. In contrast, ensuring that one's career goal facilitates the partner's other goals does not seem to affect the processes underlying career goal attainment.

Contrary to our theoretical reasoning, we did not find a significant effect of relationship duration on shared career goal. Consequently, we did not find evidence for an indirect effect of relationship duration on career goal attainment through shared career goals and shared pool of resources. One reason for this could be that the duration of a relationship is only one of many factors determining if two individuals know each other well (Starzyk, Holden, Fabrigar, & MacDonald, 2006). Although being in a long-term relationship should increase the opportunities to develop a high interdependency with the partner (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015), a long relationship does not guarantee that partners interact regularly with each other and know each other's goals. Consequently, for establishing a high overlap in the partners' self-regulatory systems it might not be sufficient to know each other for a long time. Instead, according to our results the intimacy of the relationship seems to be a more crucial determinant of developing shared career goals.

An inspection of the results regarding our control variables showed that neither age nor gender was related to career goal attainment, which contrasts previous research showing that older employees and males are more successful in attaining objectively valuable career outcomes such as promotions or a higher salary (Frear, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggstad, & Walker, 2019; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2014). Our specific study context might explain these diverging results. In Germany, Angela Merkel has been Chancellor for more than a decade now. Having one of the most popular, visible, and powerful female political leaders worldwide might attenuate the effect of gender stereotypes on voters' evaluation of political candidates in Germany. There is also evidence that female political leaders handle political crises more successfully, because they communicate with more empathy and confidence (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). In certain situations, voters may thus prefer female over male candidates. Moreover, older candidates might be perceived as less adaptable and motivated compared to younger candidates (Liebermann, Wegge, Jungmann, & Schmidt, 2013), which would counteract the positive effect of higher experience and maturity on voters' evaluation of older candidates. Taken together, particularly within the context of politics the effects of gender and age on career goal attainment seem to be rather complex and deserve attention in future research.

### 7.1. Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of our study are threefold. First, our study provides first evidence about the self-regulatory processes that link romantic relationships with career goal attainment, and thereby contributes to a more holistic understanding of the



determinants of career goal attainment. Our results imply that individuals are more likely to attain their career goals when they are in a close romantic relationship that provides them with resources for goal pursuit, at least to the extent that their career goal is well coordinated with their partner's goals. Setting, pursuing, and achieving career goals is a crucial aspect of career self-management and a prerequisite for a positive evaluation of one's own career success (Greco & Kraimer, 2020; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Kaplan, 1995). Thus, by exploring the processes underlying the attainment of a particular career goal this study improves our understanding of how employees can eventually achieve a high level of career success.

Second, with our study, we answered Greenhaus and Kossek's (2014) call for a stronger integration of work-home research with career research. In line with previous studies (e.g., Hirschi, Herrmann, Nagy, & Spurk, 2016; Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009; Ocampo, Restubog, Liwag, Wang, & Petelczyc, 2018; Valcour & Ladge, 2008), our findings imply that home-domain factors such as the romantic relationship can have a considerable influence on career-related outcomes, because "career experiences and home experiences are inextricably intertwined" (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014, p. 362). Our results show that individuals do not operate independently from their romantic partner when pursuing their career goals. Specifically, we identified shared career goals and the available shared pool of resources as mechanisms that link relationship closeness with career goal attainment. Moreover, our analysis revealed that the coordination of one's own career goal with the partner's other goals is a boundary condition for successful career goal attainment. Beyond the mere identification of the romantic relationship as a determinant of career goal attainment, our study thus provides novel and practically relevant insights into the question *how* and *under which conditions* home-domain factors such as romantic relationships affect individual careers.

Third, we provide first empirical evidence for the validity of transactive goal dynamics theory (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015) in the context of career goals. Our findings support the theory's proposition that individuals in a social relationship are interdependent in their self-regulation, and that this interdependence can enhance goal attainment by increasing the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit. We also provide first empirical support for the moderating role of goal coordination in this process. Our findings thus highlight the usefulness of the theory in the explanation of career goal attainment and advance our understanding of self-regulatory processes in career self-management. Furthermore, our study illustrates that transactive goal dynamics theory can be meaningfully integrated with other established theories. Because transactive goal dynamics theory does not explicate *what* resources form the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit, we drew on the resource classification proposed in the work-home resources model (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) to study this form of home-to-work enrichment. Thereby, we complemented transactive goal dynamics theory with an established framework that addresses the nature and role of resources in self-regulatory processes.

## 7.2. Practical implications

The findings of our study have two main practical implications for individuals and their career goal pursuit. First, our study illustrates that individuals can considerably benefit from their romantic relationship when pursuing their career goals. Our results show that when the partner shares one's own career goal, the shared pool of resources increases, resulting in improved goal attainment. This implies that individuals who pursue a challenging career goal should try to gain their partner's support for this goal to be able to draw on a larger shared pool of resources and enhance goal attainment. Second, our findings imply that how the partners coordinate their goals—including career goals, but also other personal goals—is a crucial boundary condition for successful career goal attainment. To improve goal coordination, the partners should communicate openly about their goals, as this might help them to prevent potential goal conflicts. When it comes to avoiding conflicts between their career goals, partners could use a trading-off strategy, in which the priority of the partners' career goals alternates over time in the couple according to existing career opportunities (Becker & Moen, 1999). Over time, this strategy will allow both partners to realize their career goals with the support of their partner.

The insights gained in our study can also be useful for organizations and supervisors. Our results illustrate that individuals can benefit from home-domain resources such as their romantic relationship when pursuing their career goals. Organizations and supervisors could use these insights to support their employees in developing their careers by capitalizing on home-domain resources. Family-supportive supervisors facilitate employees' ability to manage work and home demands, for instance by communicating concern for employees' nonwork lives and by providing resources that assist their employees in effectively managing work and home responsibilities (Crain & Stevens, 2018). According to our results, when assisting their employees in handling work and nonwork demands, supervisors might consider to draw their employees' attention to home-domain resources such as the romantic relationship in order to promote their career progress. In doing so, organizations and supervisors could support their employees in capitalizing on their home-domain resources when pursuing their career goals, which will ultimately help them to successfully manage their careers.

Finally, career counselors can use the insights gained in our study when supporting clients in their career self-management. Career counseling includes the clarification of clients' career goals—also in relation to goals from other life domains—and the development of action strategies for career goal pursuit (Hirschi, 2020). Career counselors should further assist their clients in identifying both resources that can support career goal attainment and barriers that can hinder career goal attainment (Hirschi, 2020; Hirschi, Zacher, & Shockley, 2020). According to our findings, the romantic relationship is such a resource that facilitates career goal attainment by increasing the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit. Moreover, our findings imply that a high conflict between one's own career goal with the partner's personal goals might be a barrier for successful career goal attainment. To enable clients who are in a romantic relationship to benefit from the resources provided by that relationship, career counselors should thus assist them in preventing goal conflicts with their partner's goals. To this end, they might offer advice or training on how to adequately communicate one's own career goals to the partner, and on how couples can successfully negotiate about their goal priorities to prevent conflicting career goals.

### 7.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our study has three main limitations. First, the generalizability of our results might be limited, because we focused on candidates in political elections to test our hypotheses. This approach ensured that all participants had the same career goal (i.e., to achieve a large proportion of votes), and enabled us to objectively assess career goal attainment. Still, the candidates' career goal might differ from the career goals pursued by employees as well as entrepreneurs. To ensure the generalizability of our results, our research model needs to be tested in other samples.

Second, we cannot completely rule out that some of our estimates are biased due to common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Although we surveyed our study participants at two points in time and measured career goal attainment objectively, most constructs in our model were assessed by the same source (i.e., the candidates). Relatedly, we used self-report measures for some constructs for which having partner ratings would be beneficial (e.g., shared career goal, shared pool of resources). Our participants were presumably well aware of the extent to which their partner shared their career goal, because ratings of interdependence usually correspond between partners (Columbus, Molho, Righetti, & Balliet, 2020). Nevertheless, it would be useful to additionally have the partner's rating for a more valid assessment of shared career goals in future studies. Likewise, although the focal actor's perception of having a large shared pool of resources is most likely the key factor affecting their career goal attainment, it would be beneficial to have the partner's indication of how many resources they allocate to the pursuit of the focal actor's career goal as a benchmark for testing the validity of our measure. Moreover, gathering data from both partners would enable the investigation of dyadic effects with the use of the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010).

Third, we cannot rule out reversed causality or reciprocal effects between the study variables, because our study design does not enable us to draw conclusions about the causal direction of the effects. In line with our theorizing, our results might imply that a high relationship closeness causes the partner to share an individual's career goals, which in turn increases the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit and ultimately results in an improved career goal attainment. Yet, it is also possible that the partner is more willing to allocate resources to the pursuit of an individual's goals when that individual is more successful in attaining their career goals and, as a result, the closeness of the relationship improves. The causal relationships that are suggested in our research model could be more rigorously tested with the use of longitudinal study designs that allow for an investigation of changes in career goal attainment over time (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010; Selig & Preacher, 2009).

To further enhance our understanding of career goal attainment in romantic relationships, we encourage future research to investigate the role of individual career goals and conflicting goals in the couple's goal system more extensively. So far, we know little about complex goal systems in romantic relationships involving hierarchically organized goals from different life domains (Kruglanski et al., 2002). When partners' career goals are in conflict with each other, the couple most likely struggles with allocating their limited shared pool of resources to the pursuit of the different goals. For instance, when one partner aims to be elected as a member of parliament while the other partner simultaneously aims to start their own business, the couple might not have enough resources for pursuing both of these highly demanding goals. As a result, one partner's career goal might be prioritized over the pursuit of the other partner's career goal (Becker & Moen, 1999; Valcour & Ladge, 2008). Which partner's career goal is prioritized in the couple presumably depends on personal characteristics (e.g., gender or personality traits), goal appraisals (e.g., goal attainability), and power dynamics in the relationship (Laurin et al., 2016). For instance, traditional gender roles that associate females with caregiving and males with breadwinning activities might result in a prioritization of the male partner's career goal in heterosexual couples with traditional attitudes when the partners' career goals are in conflict (Eagly, 1987; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015). Exploring the causes and consequences of goal conflicts within couples' goal systems would generate novel insights that are of a high practical relevance. Particularly dual-career couples could benefit from these insights, because these couples most likely face issues related to career goal coordination and resource allocation in their everyday lives (Unger, Niessen, Sonnentag, & Neff, 2014).

## 8. Conclusion

Our study illustrates that individuals are affected by their romantic relationship when pursuing their career goals. By integrating theory from the self-regulation literature, we have found evidence that a close romantic relationship can facilitate career goal attainment, and that goal conflict is a crucial boundary condition of this effect. Regarding the underlying mechanisms, our results show that in close relationships, the partner is more inclined to share an individual's career goals, which increases the shared pool of resources available for goal pursuit and, ultimately, improves career goal attainment. We hope that our study stimulates research on the effect of other nonwork factors on career-related outcomes, and that the results of this research will help individuals learn more about how to successfully pursue their career goals.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Angelika Kornblum:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Dana Unger:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Gudela Grote:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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