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Moving Toward More Perfect Unions: Daily and Long-Term Consequences of Approach and Avoidance Goals in Romantic Relationships

Emily A. Impett
University of Toronto

Amie M. Gordon
University of California, Berkeley

Aleksandr Kogan
University of Hong Kong

Christopher Oveis
Harvard University

Shelly L. Gable
University of California, Santa Barbara

Dacher Keltner
University of California, Berkeley

In 2 daily experience studies and a laboratory study, the authors test predictions from approach-avoidance motivational theory to understand how dating couples can maintain feelings of relationship satisfaction in their daily lives and over the course of time. Approach goals were associated with increased relationship satisfaction on a daily basis and over time, particularly when both partners were high in approach goals. Avoidance goals were associated with decreases in relationship satisfaction over time, and people were particularly dissatisfied when they were involved with a partner with high avoidance goals. People high in approach goals and their partners were rated as relatively more satisfied and responsive to a partner's needs by outside observers in the lab, whereas people with high avoidance goals and their partners were rated as less satisfied and responsive. Positive emotions mediated the link between approach goals and daily satisfaction in both studies, and responsiveness to the partner's needs was an additional behavioral mechanism in Study 2. Implications of these findings for approach-avoidance motivational theory and for the maintenance of satisfying relationships over time are discussed.

Keywords: relationship goals, couples, daily experience methods, approach and avoidance motivation, relationship motivation

Although most romantic partners begin their lives together with aspirations of finding enduring love, empirical studies reveal time and time again that the majority experience precipitous declines in satisfaction and intimacy over the course of their relationships (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Recent studies have begun to reveal specific cognitive tendencies and social practices that countervail this trend and enable couples to cultivate and maintain feelings of satisfaction, including idealization (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2004), capitalization (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004), forgiveness (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006), and gratitude (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). In this article, we draw on an approach-avoidance motivational perspective (Gable, 2006a) that distinguishes between *approach relationship goals* (i.e., goals focused on the pursuit of positive experiences in one's relationship such as fun, growth, and development) and *avoidance relationship goals* (i.e., goals focused on avoiding negative experiences such as disagreements and conflict) to understand how couples can maintain feelings of satisfaction and closeness. We present the results of two studies which rely on multiple methods (i.e., daily experience, short-term longitudinal, and behavioral observation) to document how approach and avoidance goals influence couples' relationship quality in their daily interactions and over the course of time.

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Emily A. Impett, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto; Amie M. Gordon and Dacher Keltner, Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley; Aleksandr Kogan, Department of Psychology, University of Hong Kong; Christopher Oveis, Department of Psychology, Harvard University; Shelly L. Gable, Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily A. Impett, University of Toronto, 3359 Mississauga Road North, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6, Canada. E-mail: eimpett@gmail.com

An Approach-Avoidance Motivational Perspective

Motives are general, affectively based motivational tendencies that energize and orient behavior (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006). Several theories of motivational processes postulate the existence of distinct approach (also called appetitive) and avoidance (also called aversive) motivational systems (see reviews in Carver,

Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Elliot & Covington, 2001). For instance, Gray's (1987) neuropsychological model of motivation posits appetitive and aversive motivational systems, referred to as the behavioral approach system (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS; see also Carver & White, 1994; and Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The BAS is an appetitive system that is primarily sensitive to positive stimuli or signals of reward, whereas the BIS is an aversive system that is primarily sensitive to negative stimuli or signals of punishment. The approach-avoidance motivational distinction has implications for understanding emotional experience. For example, Carver and Scheier (1998) outlined two independent dimensions of affective experience, one managing approach behavior (and ranging from elation to depression) and the other managing avoidance behavior (and ranging from fear to relief). In a study of motivational dispositions and daily events, participants with higher BAS sensitivity reported experiencing more daily positive affect than those with lower BAS sensitivity, whereas participants with higher BIS sensitivity reported experiencing more daily negative affect than those with lower BIS sensitivity (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000).

The approach-avoidance distinction has been particularly helpful in understanding motivation in interpersonal relationships (see Gable & Berkman, 2008, for a review). On the basis of the work of early social motivation theorists (e.g., Boyatzis, 1973; Mehrabian, 1976), Gable and colleagues have distinguished between approach and avoidance social goals (Gable, 2006a). Whereas approach social goals direct individuals toward potential positive outcomes, such as intimacy and growth in their close relationships, avoidance social goals direct individuals away from potential negative outcomes, such as conflict and rejection. For example, in a discussion about childcare, a husband who has strong approach goals may be concerned with wanting the discussion to go smoothly and wanting both partners to be happy with the outcome. In contrast, a husband with strong avoidance goals may be more concerned with avoiding conflict about childcare and preventing both partners from being unhappy with the outcome. It is important to point out that being low in approach goals is not the same as being high in avoidance goals. People who are not motivated by approach goals are not particularly interested in pursuing positive experiences in their relationships, such as bonding, intimacy, or fun activities. In contrast, people who are motivated by avoidance goals are interested in avoiding negative experiences, such as conflict, betrayal, or rejection by a romantic partner.

Recent studies have found that approach and avoidance social goals predict different social outcomes within close relationships. In the first empirical investigation of social goals, Gable (2006a) asked participants to generate a list of goals, three for their romantic life and three for any other aspect of their social life; these goals were later coded as approach or avoidance in nature. Results showed that whereas approach goals were associated with more satisfaction with social life and less loneliness, avoidance goals were associated with increased anxiety and loneliness 8 weeks later. Following up this initial work, Elliot et al. (2006) developed an eight-item measure of approach and avoidance social goals and found that approach social goals were associated with greater subjective well-being, whereas avoidance social goals were associated with more reports of physical health symptoms 3.5 months later.

More recently, Impett and colleagues conducted a study of approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships, using an adaptation of the measure of social goals developed by Elliot et al. (2006). Using this scale in a short-term longitudinal study and two daily experience studies, they found that people with strong approach goals in their romantic relationships maintained high levels of sexual desire on a daily basis and over a 6-month period of time (Impett, Strachman, et al., 2008). In addition, several studies have examined the implications of approach and avoidance goals pursued in specific relational contexts such as sexuality (Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005) and sacrifice (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Two daily experience studies have shown that on days when individuals made sacrifices or engaged in sexual activity for approach goals, they reported greater feelings of satisfaction, but on days when they did so for avoidance goals, they reported less relationship satisfaction (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). Further, a combined experience sampling study and interval contingent study of romantic relationships showed that people with high approach goals base their feelings of relationship satisfaction on positive thoughts about the relationship, whereas people high in avoidance goals base their feelings of satisfaction on negative thoughts about the relationship (Gable & Poore, 2008).

The current set of studies extends previous research on approach and avoidance relationship goals in four critical ways. First, most of the existing research on relationship goals has focused on only one member of the couple, despite the fact that partners are involved in ongoing, dynamic interactions with another person who has his or her own goals for the relationship. The current work is the first set of studies we know of to focus on goals in a dyadic context, measuring the relationship goals and relationship satisfaction of both members of romantic couples. We investigate how pursuing approach versus avoidance goals impacts the partner's feelings about the relationship and if and how partners' goals interact to shape relationship satisfaction. Second, we test critical differences in how relationship goals influence relationship satisfaction in daily interactions versus over time, advancing specific predictions about the conditions under which relationship goals should be associated with relationship satisfaction. Third, given that several previous studies have shown that approach goals are associated with increased feelings of satisfaction, we test a new mechanism to explain why pursuing approach goals benefits relationships, focusing specifically on the role of positive emotions. Fourth, all of the existing research on approach and avoidance relationship goals has relied on self-report measures. The current investigation includes the first study on relationship goals to bring couples into the laboratory, enabling us to corroborate our self-report findings with outsider observers' ratings of both partners' relationship quality.

Toward A Dyadic Perspective on Relationship Goals

Previous research on approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships has been limited by a focus on only one member of the romantic couple. No study to date has taken a dyadic perspective, focusing on how goals shape both partners' relationship quality. Specifically, no research has investigated how one person's pursuit of approach versus avoidance goals impacts his or her partner. Previous empirical studies set the stage for our first set

of predictions concerning the relationship between an actor's approach or avoidance goals and the partner's satisfaction. People who are high in approach goals seek out more positive events (Gable et al., 2000) and base their satisfaction on positive thoughts about the relationship (Gable & Poore, 2008), in turn leading them to create a more positive relational environment (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000). Therefore, we predicted that the partners of approach-oriented people will ultimately experience more satisfaction in the relationship. In contrast, people high in avoidance goals remember more negative social information (Strachman & Gable, 2006), are more reactive to negative events (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006a; Gable et al., 2000), and base their satisfaction on feelings of insecurity (Gable & Poore, 2008). Over time, this chronic focus on the negative may erode the partner's feelings of satisfaction. Thus, we predicted that whereas one person's approach goals will enhance the partner's satisfaction, that same individual's avoidance goals will diminish the partner's satisfaction.

Taking a dyadic level of analysis raises intriguing questions about possible interactions between partners' goals. For example, will relationships thrive if only one partner is high in approach goals, or does it take both partners to be high in approach goals to promote lasting feelings of satisfaction? Here we tentatively predict that whereas it may only take one partner to be high in approach goals for partners to experience satisfaction in the moment, it likely requires that both partners be high in approach goals for the relationship to flourish over time. In contrast, given the research showing the powerful toxic effects of negative processes in romantic relationships (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000) and research showing that people feel more disconnected from and dislike people who chronically express negative emotions (see review by Keltner & Kring, 1998), we tentatively propose that it only takes one partner to be high in avoidance goals to negatively impact the relationship over time and decrease the satisfaction of both partners in the relationship.

Relationship Goals in the Moment and Over Time

The present studies build on the existing literature in a second way by investigating how the pursuit of approach and avoidance relationship goals influences feelings of relationship satisfaction on a daily basis as well as over time. On the basis of research showing that people high in approach goals experience more positive events and social interactions (Gable et al., 2000), we expected that on a daily basis and over the longer term, people with high approach relationship goals should experience increased feelings of satisfaction. However, we expected to see a different pattern for people high in avoidance goals. People with high avoidance goals do not experience more frequent negative relationship exchanges, but they do react to them more strongly when they do occur (Gable, 2006a). Therefore, we predicted that people high in avoidance goals would not necessarily experience poorer relationship quality on a daily basis than people with low avoidance goals, given that negative relational exchanges happen with little frequency on a daily basis in relationships (Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003) providing people high in avoidance goals with little opportunity to react to these events with decreased feelings of satisfaction. Over longer periods of time, however, everyone is bound to experience negative interactions with a dating partner, giving the people who are high in avoidance goals opportunities to react to them with feelings of decreased satisfaction. Thus, we expected that although avoidance goals will not be associated with daily relationship satisfaction, they will be associated with decreased relationship quality over time (i.e., a several-month period in romantic relationships).

Positive Emotions as a Mediating Link Between Approach Goals and Relationship Satisfaction

A third important extension of the current studies was to understand why approach goals are so beneficial for relationships by testing an important mechanism of the link between approach relationship goals and relationship quality. Several studies have provided support for a "differential exposure" mechanism wherein people who are high in approach goals actually seek out and experience more positive events and social interactions (Gable, 2006a; Gable et al., 2000). Another possible mechanism that has yet to be tested concerns the role of positive emotions. Emotions are likely to be an important mediating process, especially given the central role that affect plays in motivational processes (Keltner & Lerner, 2009). Several studies on general approach motivation (e.g., Gable et al., 2000) and approach goals in romantic relationships (e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005) have shown that people with high approach goals report experiencing stronger positive emotions than people with low approach goals.

The extent to which people experience positive emotions should, in turn, influence feelings of relationship satisfaction. Within the framework of Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, positive emotions broaden people's attention and thinking, and these broadened outlooks help people to discover and build consequential personal resources, such as social support and enhanced feelings of satisfaction (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). On the basis of this model, we predicted that people who experience heightened feelings of positive emotions on a daily basis will also report feeling more satisfied in their relationships. In short, people with high approach goals should experience stronger daily positive emotions, in turn contributing to greater feelings of satisfaction with the relationship. By taking a dyadic perspective, we are also able to test the hypothesis that having a partner who is focused on pursuing positive experiences, such as fun, growth and development, should also lead people to feel more positive emotions. Thus, we expected that having a partner who is high in approach goals will influence people's positive emotions, in turn making them feel more satisfied with the relationship. As previously discussed, we did not expect to find an association between avoidance relationship goals and daily relationship quality, because negative relational exchanges happen infrequently, giving avoidance-motivated people little opportunity to react to these events with increased negative emotion. However, should we find an association between avoidance goals and daily relationship quality, we will test negative emotions as a mediator, because they should be a prime contributor to feelings of satisfaction for people high in avoidance goals.

Moving Beyond Self-Reports of Relationship Quality

All of the existing research on approach and avoidance relationship goals has relied on self-report measures of relationship qual-

ity. The fourth crucial extension of the current research is to investigate how relationship goals influence dyadic interactions in the laboratory, thereby enabling us to corroborate self-report findings with outside observers' ratings of the quality of intimate relationships. By incorporating outside, observer-based measures of relationship quality, the current research is less limited by issues concerning self-report data, specifically that the outcomes of interest (i.e., relationship satisfaction) overlap semantically with the predictors (i.e., approach and avoidance goals).

In the present research, we focus on two critical indicators of relationship quality in the laboratory. The first is a global indicator of relationship satisfaction. In line with our self-report predictions, we predicted that people high in approach goals would be seen as relatively more satisfied than people low in approach goals; further, we expected that the partners of people who are high in approach goals would be seen as more satisfied than the partners of people who are low in approach goals. In contrast, we expected that people high in avoidance goals would be seen as less satisfied than their less avoidant counterparts. In addition, given their chronic focus on avoiding negative outcomes in their relationships, we expected that the partners of people who are high in avoidance goals would be rated as less satisfied than the partners of people who are not as focused on making sure negative things do not happen in their relationships.

Another advantage of studying dyadic interactions in the laboratory is that we can observe specific behaviors that may account for why approach and avoidance goals shape feelings of relationship satisfaction. The second indicator of relationship quality for which we code is behavioral responsiveness to the partner's needs, defined as the extent to which partners make each other feel cared for, understood, and validated (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Numerous studies have shown that responsiveness is at the core of satisfying relationships (e.g., Gable & Reis, 2006; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008) and is essential not only when couples navigate the inevitable stressors of everyday life and seek out social support (Iida, Seidman, Shrout, Fujita, & Bolger, 2008) but also when they share and discuss positive events with one another (Gable et al., 2004).

Given their focus on creating positive experiences in their relationships, we expected that people with high approach goals would be rated as relatively more responsive to their partner's needs by outside observers than would people who are low in approach goals. In contrast, people who are high in avoidance goals are motivated to avoid negative experiences, such as conflict and rejection by a romantic partner (Gable, 2006b). Thus, we expected that this chronic focus on avoiding negative outcomes would diminish the ability of people who are high in avoidance goals to respond to a partner's needs. In other words, people who are busy focusing on avoiding negative outcomes may miss the opportunity to connect with their partner, leading them to be rated as relatively less responsive. We also investigate the possibility that these effects might extend to the partners of people who are high in approach and avoidance goals. For example, it may be easy or relatively more rewarding to be responsive to a partner who is high in approach goals and open to receiving that responsiveness. In contrast, it may be relatively hard to be responsive to a partner who is chronically focused on avoiding negative outcomes and less open to being the recipient of caring, responsive behavior (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Finally, we anticipated that responsiveness would be an important mechanism of the link between approach and avoidance goals and coded satisfaction. That is, responsiveness should account for the links between relationship goals and satisfaction.

Overview of the Studies

We conducted two studies to test our predictions about how approach and avoidance relationship goals influence both partners' relationship quality as they interact in the moment as well as how goals influence partners' relationship quality over time. Study 1 was a 14-day daily experience study of individuals in dating relationships with a 1-month follow-up. In the second two-part study, both members of dating couples participated in a 14-day daily experience study with a 3-month longitudinal follow-up (Study 2A) and a laboratory interaction (Study 2B).

Study 1

In this 14-day daily experience study of college students in dating relationships with a 1-month longitudinal follow-up, we expected that on a daily basis and over the longer term, people with high approach relationship goals would experience increased feelings of satisfaction and closeness. However, we expected that whereas avoidance goals would not be associated with daily relationship quality, they would be associated with decreased relationship quality over time. We also predicted that people with high approach goals would experience stronger daily positive emotions, in turn contributing to greater feelings of satisfaction and closeness to a romantic partner.

Method

Participants and procedure. The study was advertised as an examination of "dating relationships," and participants received credit toward psychology coursework at the University of California, Los Angeles in exchange for participation. To be eligible, participants had to (a) be currently involved in a (nonmarital) dating relationship, (b) see their partner at least 5 days per week (thus ruling out long-distance relationships), and (c) be the only member of a given couple to participate in the study. One hundred fifty-three participants (69 men, 84 women) completed the study. The mean relationship length for all participants was 19 months (range = 1 month to 8 years; SD = 19.4 months). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 years (M = 20.1, SD = 2.4). Participants comprised a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds; 40% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 35% were White, 13% were Hispanic, 4% were African American, and 8% self-identified as multiethnic or "other."

During an initial session, each participant was given 14 surveys containing the daily measures, one for each night of the week. A researcher then reviewed the procedures for completing the daily surveys, specifically emphasizing that participants should begin completing their surveys that evening; that they should complete one survey each night before going to bed; that their responses were confidential; that they should not discuss their surveys with their partner; and that if they missed a day, they should leave that particular survey blank. To bolster and verify compliance with the daily schedule, participants were asked to return completed sur-

veys every 2 to 3 days to a locked mailbox located outside of the laboratory. As an incentive, each time participants handed in a set of surveys on time, they received a lottery ticket for one of several cash prizes ($100, $50, $25) to be awarded after the study. Participants who did not return a particular set of surveys on time were reminded by phone or e-mail. Only daily surveys returned on time were treated as valid and retained in the data set. In total, participants completed 1,928 daily surveys on time, an average of 12.6 (out of 14) days per person.

One month after the daily experience study, participants were sent a short e-mail survey with questions about their current relationship status and satisfaction. Of the 153 original participants, 134 (88%) responded to the survey. Participants who completed and did not complete the survey did not significantly differ in baseline relationship satisfaction, commitment, or approach or avoidance relationship goals. Of the 134 participants who responded to the follow-up, 18 (13%) of the respondents indicated that they had broken up with their partner sometime during the month after the study.

Background measures. In their initial session in the laboratory, participants completed a questionnaire with basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, relationship duration), as well as an eight-item measure of approach and avoidance goals originally developed by Elliot et al. (2006) for use in close relationships more generally (e.g., friendships and dating relationships) and adapted for use in romantic relationships (Gable, 2006b; Impett, Strachman, et al., 2008). Participants responded to such items as "I will be trying to deepen my relationship with my romantic partner" and "I will be trying to move toward growth and development in my romantic relationship" (approach relationship goals; four items; $\alpha = .78$) and "I will be trying to avoid disagreements and conflicts with my romantic partner" and "I will be trying to make sure that nothing bad happens in my romantic relationship" (avoidance relationship goals; four items; $\alpha = .79$) over the course of the next academic semester on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The mean for the approach goals measure was 5.8 ($SD = 1.0$), and the mean for the avoidance goals measure was 5.3 ($SD = 1.0$). The correlation between approach relationship goals and avoidance relationship goals was .56 ($p < .001$), which is similar to the correlation between social-approach goals and social-avoidance goals reported by Elliot et al. (2006). In addition, relationship satisfaction was assessed with a standard measure (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Participants responded to such statements as "Our relationship makes me happy" on 9-point scales (0 = *do not agree at all* to 8 = *agree completely*). In this sample, $\alpha = .89$ for satisfaction ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.42$).

Daily measures. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Tellegen, & Clark, 1988) was used to measure daily positive emotions (day-level $\alpha = .92$, person-level $\alpha = .95$; $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.93$) and negative emotions (day-level $\alpha = .91$, person-level alpha = .94; $M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.03$). Participants were instructed to answer the questions according to "how you felt today." To assess daily relationship quality, participants were asked "How satisfied with your relationship were you today?" and "How close did you feel to your partner today?" on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). These two variables were highly intercorrelated, so we combined them into a composite variable (day-level $\alpha = .93$, person-level $\alpha = .95$; $M = 4.9$; $SD = 1.5$).

Results

A central goal of this study was to test predictions about the associations between approach and avoidance relationship goals and daily relationship quality. To address the data nonindependence, we performed analyses using multilevel modeling techniques in the hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) computer program (HLMwin v. 6.08; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004). In all of the analyses reported below, we entered approach and avoidance goals simultaneously. Thus, any significant effects suggest that approach and avoidance goals have independent predictive effects on relationship quality. For all of the analyses reported below, we tested for interactions with gender, and none of these interactions reached significance.

Relationship goals and daily relationship quality. The first major set of hypotheses concerned associations between approach and avoidance goals and daily relationship quality. As predicted, the results revealed that approach goals were associated with increased daily relationship quality ($B = .33$, $p < .001$), but avoidance goals were not significantly associated with daily relationship quality ($B = -.08$, $p = .36$).[1] Further, the association between approach goals and relationship quality remained significant after controlling for relationship duration[2] as well as initial relationship satisfaction and commitment. In addition, there were never significant interactions between approach and avoidance relationship goals in predicting any of the daily or longitudinal outcomes in this study.

The mediating role of positive emotions. The second hypothesis concerned the mediating role of positive emotions in explaining why individuals with strong approach goals experience enhanced daily relationship quality. We tested for multilevel mediation based on the principles of Zhang, Zyphur, and Preacher (2009). Specifically, because our predictor variable (approach relationship goals) can only predict between-person differences, we separated within- and between-person effects by group centering positive emotions at Level 1 and reentering the mean of positive emotions at Level 2. In all of the mediational analyses, we concentrated on the aggregate of positive emotions (Level 2 variable) as the mediator of the link between approach goals and daily relationship quality.

The first requirement in demonstrating mediation is that the predictor variable be associated with the outcome variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). As shown in Figure 1, approach relationship goals were significantly associated with daily relationship quality. The second requirement is to show that approach relationship goals predict the putative mediator, positive emotions; indeed they did. The third requirement is that the mediator predicts the outcome variable (i.e., relationship quality), controlling for the predictor variable, and that this effect could plausibly account for the direct effect between the predictor and the outcome variable. Aggregated positive emotions significantly predicted daily relationship quality, controlling for daily positive emotions, and the direct effect from approach relationship goals to relationship qual-

[1] Avoidance goals were not significantly associated with daily negative emotions in Study 1 (unstandardized HLM coefficient = .04, $p = .16$).

[2] Relationship duration never significantly interacted with approach or avoidance relationship goals in any of the analyses in Studies 1, 2A, or 2B.

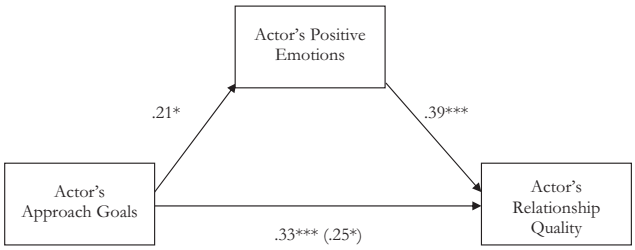

Figure 1. Positive emotions as a mediator between approach goals and daily relationship quality (Study 1). Note that all numbers are unstandardized hierarchical linear modeling coefficients. The coefficient on the bottom line outside of the parentheses represents the direct effect of the actor's approach goals on the actor's relationship quality. The coefficient inside of the parentheses represents the indirect effect after accounting for the actor's positive emotions as a mediator. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

ity dropped in significance. A significant Sobel (1982) test indicated that the drop in the value of the latter unstandardized HLM coefficient was significant ($z = 2.06$, $p < .05$), providing evidence for partial mediation. In other words, participants with high approach relationship goals experienced strong positive emotions, in turn promoting greater daily relationship quality.

Relationship goals and relationship satisfaction at the 1-month follow-up. The third major set of hypotheses was that approach goals would predict increased relationship satisfaction at the 1-month follow-up, whereas avoidance goals would predict decreased satisfaction 1 month later. Results of regression analyses showed that approach goals predicted increased relationship satisfaction at the 1-month follow-up controlling for baseline satisfaction ($B = .23$, $p < .01$), consistent with our hypothesis. Also consistent with our hypotheses, avoidance goals predicted decreased satisfaction at the follow-up, controlling for baseline satisfaction ($B = -.16$, $p < .05$). Both of these results remained significant after controlling for relationship duration and commitment pointing to the robust nature of the findings.

Discussion

In this daily experience study of individuals in dating relationships, we showed that people who were high in approach relationship goals experienced greater relationship quality on a day-to-day basis as well as over a 1-month period of time. The association between approach relationship goals and daily relationship quality was mediated by positive emotions. Avoidance goals were not associated with daily relationship quality, whereas they were associated with decreased relationship quality over time. This study was critical in documenting the influence of approach and avoidance relationship goals on relationship quality in the moment and over time and provided the first empirical evidence for the role of positive emotions as a mechanism. However, it remains unclear what impact relationship goals have on the emotions and relationship satisfaction of the other partner and if relationship goals would be associated with relationship quality over a longer period of time.

Study 2A

Study 2A was designed to extend the results of the previous study in several important ways.

First, we predicted that not only will people with strong approach relationship goals report increased daily relationship quality, but that their partners will report greater feelings of relationship satisfaction and closeness as well. To test this hypothesis, we conducted another 14-day daily experience study, this time obtaining measures of approach and avoidance relationship goals and daily measures of emotions and relationship quality from both members of the couple. We also sought to extend the mediational findings from Study 1 by determining if one person's approach goals influence his or her partner's positive emotions, in turn contributing to increased relationship quality. To do so, we used a different measure of emotions which included more relational emotions (e.g., compassion, love, and gratitude).

With regards to our longitudinal predictions, we also sought to determine if the associations between relationship goals and relationship quality would persist over a longer time period, so in this study, we included a 3-month longitudinal follow-up. We assessed multiple indicators of relationship quality, including satisfaction, commitment, closeness, and thoughts about breaking up, allowing us to examine the impact of approach and avoidance relationship goals on several important indicators of relationship quality over time. We predicted that although it may only take one partner to be high in approach goals for partners to experience satisfaction in the moment, it likely takes both partners to be high in approach goals in order for the relationship to flourish over time. In contrast, given the powerful negative effects of negative processes in romantic relationships, we expected that it only takes one partner to be high in avoidance goals to negatively impact the relationship over time, ultimately decreasing the satisfaction of both partners in the relationship.

Method

Participants and procedure. All participants were recruited from the San Francisco, California, Bay Area by means of online flyers posted on Craigslist.org and paper flyers placed throughout the Bay Area. A total of 80 couples were recruited for the study; however, 11 couples were removed from the analyses because one member of the couple did not complete the initial online survey or we could not properly match a participant's initial online survey to his or her daily experience records. Of the 69 couples who were included in the analyses, 64 couples were heterosexual, 4 were lesbian, and there was one gay male couple in the sample. Participants comprised a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds: 52% were European or European American, 20% were Chinese or Chinese American, 8% were African or African American, 5% were Mexican or Mexican American, and 15% were of other ethnicities. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years ($M = 24.0$, $SD = 6.7$). The couples had been dating from 6 months to 30 years (median = 16 months; $SD = 23$ months). In addition, 48% of the couples were cohabitating.

After both partners agreed to take part in the study, the participants were e-mailed a Web link to the initial online survey, which was to be completed before the couple arrived at our laboratory. Couples came to the lab, completed several self-report measures,

and then participated in videotaped interactions (described in detail in Study 2B). At the end of the laboratory session, a research assistant explained the procedures for the daily experience component of the study to each couple. Both members were asked to complete a 10-min online survey through surveymonkey.com for 14 consecutive nights beginning with the day of the laboratory session. Participants were informed that in the event that they missed a diary at night, they could complete the diary the next morning; however, if they still did not complete the diary by the end of the morning of the next day, they were asked to skip that diary. In addition to explaining the basic procedures to the couples, the research assistants also emphasized that each diary should be completed anonymously, that the couple should not discuss their answers with one another during the course of the study, and that the research team would never reveal the responses to their partner.

To maximize compliance, we sent reminders via e-mail and employed a lottery bonus system. Each night around 10 p.m., a member of the research team would e-mail a reminder to all participants who had not yet completed the diary for that day. In addition, participants were instructed that for every diary they completed on time, a ticket in their name would be entered into a raffle to win an additional $100, $50, or $25 cash prize. Participants completed 1,686 diary entries on time, an average of 12.2 (out of 14) days per person.

Three months after completing the daily experience portion of the study, we recontacted both members of the couple and provided a link to a 10-min online follow-up survey. Of the 138 participants who provided daily experience data, 104 (75%) participants completed the follow-up survey. Participants who completed and did not complete the follow-up did not significantly differ in baseline satisfaction, commitment, or relationship goals. Of the 62 couples who had at least one member complete the follow-up, eight (13%) indicated that they had broken up with their partner sometime during the three months after the study. Each partner in the couple was paid $30 for completing the 14-day daily experience study and $10 for completing the 3-month online follow-up (for a total of $40 paid to each participant for completing both components of the study).

Background measures. In the initial online survey, participants completed a questionnaire with basic demographic information, as well as the same measure of approach and avoidance relationship goals completed in Study 1 (Elliot et al., 2006), this time on a 5-point scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*). In this sample, $\alpha = .84$ for approach relationship goals, and $\alpha = .73$ for avoidance relationship goals. The mean for the approach goals measure was 3.28 ($SD = 0.55$), and the mean for the avoidance goals measure was 2.65 ($SD = 0.74$). The correlation between approach and avoidance relationship goals was $r = .35$ ($p < .01$).

We assessed baseline relationship quality with four measures. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the same measure used in Study 1 (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .90$, $M = 5.09$, $SD = 0.84$). Commitment to the relationship was assessed with a seven-item measure (Rusbult et al., 1998; $\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.87$). Participants responded to such questions as "I want my relationship to last for a very long time" on 7-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). To measure participants' thoughts about breaking up with their romantic partner, we adapted four items from the Marital Instability Index (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983). Participants answered the following questions: "Have you or your partner ever seriously suggested the idea of breaking up?" "Have you discussed breaking up with a close friend?" and "Even people who get along quite well with their partner sometimes wonder whether their relationship is working out. Have you ever thought your relationship might be in trouble?" on 3-point scales (0 = *never*; 1 = *within the last month*; 2 = *currently*). In addition, they answered the following question: "Have you and your partner had a separation or broken up?" on a 2-point scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *within the last month*). Because these items were measured on different response scales, we standardized each item before combining all items into an overall dating instability score ($\alpha = .71$; $M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.36$). Finally, closeness was measured with the one-item Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Participants were presented with a series of seven pairs of circles, one circle representing them and the other circle representing their partner. In each picture, the circles overlap to varying degrees (from not at all overlapping to almost completely overlapping), and participants were asked to choose the picture which best represents their relationship with their romantic partner ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.29$).

Daily measures.

Relationship quality. Each day, both partners rated the extent to which they felt satisfaction and closeness in their romantic relationship on 5-point scales (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*). As in Study 1, we combined these variables into a composite variable (day-level $\alpha = .92$, person-level $\alpha = .93$, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.02$).

Emotions. Each day, participants indicated the extent to which they experienced 15 emotions on 5-point scales (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*). This measure was adapted for use in romantic relationships from a measure of social emotions (Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009) and extends Study 1 by focusing on more relational emotions. The eight positive emotions included amused/having fun, happy/pleased/joyful, proud/good about myself, uplifted/inspired/elevated, affectionate/loving/caring, cared about/loved/connected, compassionate/sympathetic, and grateful/appreciative/thankful (day-level $\alpha = .93$, person-level $\alpha = .96$; $M = 2.14$; $SD = 0.96$). The seven negative emotions included angry/irritable/frustrated, anxious/nervous, guilty/embarrassed/ashamed, sad/depressed/down, criticized/blamed, lonely/isolated, and resentful toward my partner (day-level $\alpha = .85$, person-level $\alpha = .93$).

Three-month follow-up measures. Three months after the daily experience study, participants completed an online survey with the same four measures of relationship quality that they completed at baseline: relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.07$), commitment ($\alpha = .93$; $M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.95$), closeness ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.39$), and thoughts about breaking up ($\alpha = .78$; $M = 0.35$, $SD = 0.42$).

Results

Data-analysis plan. In the current study, we assessed both members of romantic couples to examine the actor and partner effects of relationship goals on daily relationship quality. The actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) was used to assess the contribution of both partners' relationship goals to daily relationship quality. APIM allows for the estimation of both the effect that a person's independent

variable has on his/her own dependent variable (known as an actor effect) and the effect that a person's independent variable has on his/her partner's dependent variable (known as a partner effect). APIM assumes that data from two members of a couple are not independent, and treats the dyad rather than the individual as the unit of analysis. Thus, actor and partner effects are estimated simultaneously, controlling for each other. For example, an actor effect for approach goals would assess the daily relationship quality of people with high approach goals compared with those with low approach goals, controlling for the participant's level of avoidance goals and the partner's level of approach and avoidance goals. A partner effect for approach goals would assess whether people with partners who have high approach goals differ in their daily relationship quality from people with partners who have low approach goals, controlling for the actor's own level of approach and avoidance goals and the partner's level of avoidance goals. In short, actor effects resemble the types of effects that are estimated by traditional data-analytic techniques, but they control for the potential impact of the partner, whereas the partner effects model the interdependence that exists between partners in relationships.

We analyzed the data using multilevel modeling in the HLM computer program (HLMwin v. 6.08; Raudenbush et al., 2004). We used a three-level model, in which days were nested within persons and persons were nested within couples (Gable & Poore, 2008). This analysis simultaneously controls for dependencies in the same person's reports across days and between partners. For all of the analyses reported below, we entered both actor and partner approach and avoidance goals simultaneously. There were never any significant interactions between approach and avoidance goals in predicting any of the daily or longitudinal outcomes. Finally, we tested for interactions with gender, and none of these interactions reached significance. Descriptive statistics and correlations among actor and partner variables are shown in Table 1.

Relationship goals and both partners' reports of daily relationship quality. The first set of hypotheses concerns links between approach and avoidance relationship goals and both partners' reports of daily relationship quality. As predicted, people's own approach goals were positively associated with their own relationship quality ($B = .68$, $p < .001$) and their partner's relationship quality ($B = .39$, $p < .001$). In other words, the higher people's approach relationship goals, the more relationship satisfaction and closeness both partners reported on a daily basis. As in Study 1, both of these effects remained significant after controlling for the length of time that couples had been dating as well as both partners' relationship satisfaction and commitment at the baseline of the study. Consistent with our predictions and replicating the results of Study 1, there were no associations between avoidance relationship goals and daily relationship quality, nor were there any partner effects of avoidance goals on relationship quality.[3] In addition, there were no significant interactions between approach and avoidance goals nor were there any significant interactions between both partners' relationship goals in predicting daily relationship quality.

The mediating role of positive emotions. The second set of hypotheses concerned the mediating role of positive emotions in accounting for both the association between people's own approach goals and their own daily relationship quality (the actor effect), as well as the association between people's approach goals and their partner's daily relationship quality (the partner effect). As in Study 1, we tested for multilevel mediation using the principles of Zhang et al. (2009) to separate within- and between-person effects. For both mediational analyses, we entered actor approach goals, actor avoidance goals, partner approach goals, and partner avoidance goals simultaneously as predictors (although they are not all depicted in Figure 2).[4]

For the mediation of the actor effect, we tested the hypothesis that people with high approach relationship goals experienced increased daily positive emotions, in turn contributing to higher levels of relationship quality. As shown in Panel A in Figure 2, we found support for this hypothesis. First, as shown above, actor approach relationship goals were significantly associated with actor daily relationship quality. Second, actor approach relationship goals predicted the mediator, actor positive emotions. Third, the actor's aggregated positive emotions significantly predicted actor daily relationship quality, controlling for the actor's daily positive emotions, and the direct effect from actor approach relationship goals to actor relationship quality dropped in significance. A significant Sobel (1982) test indicated that the drop in the value of the latter beta was significant ($z = 4.64$, $p < .001$), providing evidence for partial mediation. In other words, replicating the findings of Study 1, participants with high approach relationship goals experienced strong positive emotions, in turn promoting greater daily relationship quality.

For the mediation of the partner effect, we tested the hypothesis that people with high approach relationship goals have partners who report increased daily positive emotions, in turn contributing to the partner's increased feelings of satisfaction and closeness. As shown in Figure 2B, we also found strong support for this hypothesis. First, as shown above, actor approach relationship goals were significantly associated with the partner's daily relationship quality. Second, actor approach relationship goals predicted the mediator, the partner's positive emotions. Third, the partner's aggregated positive emotions significantly predicted the partner's daily relationship quality, controlling for the partner's daily positive emotions, and the direct effect from actor approach relationship goals to partner relationship quality dropped to nonsignificance. A significant Sobel (1982) test indicated that the drop in the value of the latter beta was significant ($z = 3.76$, $p < .001$), providing evidence for full mediation. In other words, extending the findings of Study 1, participants with high approach relationship goals have partners who experienced strong positive emotions, in turn promoting greater daily relationship quality.

Relationship goals and relationship quality at the 3-month follow-up. Our third set of hypotheses concerns the link between both partners' relationship goals as well as interactions between partners' goals and the quality of relationships over time. We tentatively predicted that although it will only take one partner high in avoidance goals to erode relationship quality over time, both partners need to be high in approach goals for relationships to

[3] Avoidance goals were positively associated with daily negative emotions in Study 2A (unstandardized HLM coefficient = .10, $p < .05$).

[4] We excluded partner positive emotions in this test of mediation because of concerns about potential overlap in variance between both partners' reports of daily positive emotions. However, we also tested the mediational model with partner positive emotions included as a control, and all results remained significant.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Actor and Partner Variables (Studies 2A and 2B)

Variable	Approach goals	Avoidance goals	Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Coded satisfaction	Coded responsiveness	*M*	*SD*
Approach goals	.15	.17	.33***	.10	.24*	.28**	3.28	0.58
Avoidance goals		.21*	.12	−.02	−.11	−.08	2.64	0.75
Positive emotions			.61***	−.15	.24*	.31**	2.12	0.78
Negative emotions				.60***	.05	.04	0.47	0.41
Coded satisfaction					.81***	.45***	4.56	1.12
Coded responsiveness						.55***	2.97	1.10

Note. The correlations on the diagonal are between the two members of the couple.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

flourish. To test these predictions, we used SPSS mixed models to address the nested nature of the data. In each of the longitudinal models, we controlled for baseline levels of the same relationship variable for both the actor and the partner. For example, in the model predicting follow-up relationship satisfaction, we controlled for baseline levels of relationship satisfaction as reported by both the actor and the partner. In the analyses, we investigated the effects of both partners' relationship goals as well as interactions between both partners' relationship goals (i.e., approach by partner approach, and avoidance by partner avoidance pairings) on relationship satisfaction, commitment, closeness, and thoughts about breaking up at the 3-month follow-up.

Table 2 depicts the estimates for the effects of both partners' relationship goals as well as interactions between both partners' relationship goals on the four indicators of relationship quality at the 3-month follow-up. In terms of the associations between approach goals and long-term relationship quality, the one outcome that was significantly associated with approach relationship goals was commitment. That is, the higher people were in approach relationship goals, the more committed they felt to their partner 3 months later, controlling for baseline levels of commitment. In addition, partner approach goals were associated with increases in commitment and decreases in thoughts about breaking up over time. However, as predicted, there were significant interactions between both partners' approach goals in predicting all four of the relationship outcomes. We plotted the interactions between approach and avoidance goals in predicting each of the measures of relationship quality at the follow-up at one standard deviation above and below the mean in approach and partner approach goals (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). All four graphs looked similar, so for illustrative purposes, we depict the interaction for relationship satisfaction in Figure 3. These results suggest that, to the extent that both partners were high in approach relationship goals, both partners reported high levels of satisfaction, commitment, closeness, and fewer thoughts about breaking up at the 3-month follow-up.

In terms of associations between avoidance goals and long-term relationship quality, the only outcome that was significantly associated with avoidance goals was satisfaction. Specifically, the higher people were in avoidance goals, the less satisfied they felt with their relationships three months later, although this effect was marginally significant. As predicted, there were also significant partner effects for avoidance relationship goals on all four of the relationship outcomes. Specifically, the higher people's partners were in avoidance goals, the lower their satisfaction, commitment, and closeness, and the more they had thought about breaking up with their partner by the 3-month follow-up. Subsequent analyses revealed that none of these longitudinal effects significantly interacted with gender.

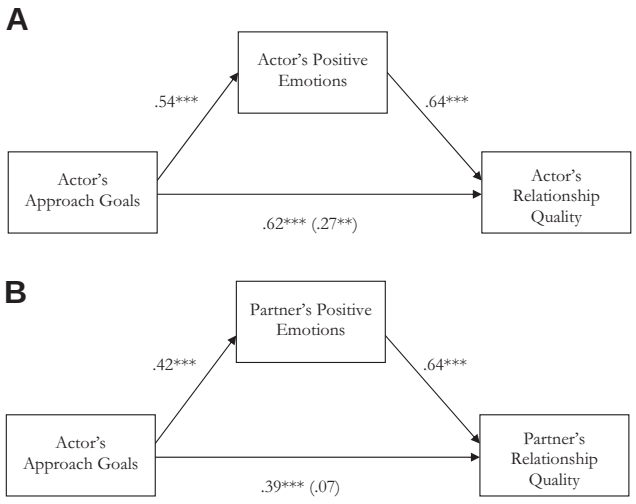

Figure 2. A. Positive emotions as a mediator between the actor's approach relationship goals and the actor's daily relationship quality (Study 2A). B. Partner's positive emotions as a mediator between the actor's approach relationship goals and the partner's daily relationship quality (Study 2A). Note that all numbers are unstandardized hierarchical linear modeling coefficients. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This dyadic daily experience study extended the results of Study 1 in several important ways. First, consistent with Study 1, we found that approach goals predicted increased daily and long-term relationship quality. In contrast, avoidance goals were not associated with daily relationship quality but were associated with decreased relationship satisfaction three months later. Second, we extended the results of Study 1 by showing that one person's approach goals are associated with both partners' daily relationship quality, because both members of the couples experience increased positive emotions on a daily basis. Third, because we measured the relationship goals of both partners, we found support

Table 2
Prospective Associations Between Relationship Goals and Four Indicators of Relationship Quality at the Three-Month Follow-Up (Study 2A)

Predictor	Relationship quality at the 3-month follow-up			
	Satisfaction	Commitment	Closeness	Break-up thoughts
Actor approach	.25	.38**	.46	−.06
Actor avoidance	−.27†	−.14	−.23	.07
Partner approach	.27	.22*	.43	−.16*
Partner avoidance	−.29*	−.33***	−.54*	.14*
Actor Approach × Partner Approach	.42**	.31***	.48*	−.21**
Actor Avoidance × Partner Avoidance	−.15	−.05	.12	.07

Note. All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients. Each analysis controls for the baseline level of the respective variable.
† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

for the predicted interaction that it takes two people to be high in approach goals in order for couples to thrive. In contrast, it only takes one partner high in avoidance goals to see harmful effects on couples over the long term. More specifically, the partners of people high in avoidance goals felt less satisfied, committed, and close and had more thoughts about breaking up, highlighting the difficulties of being in a partnership with someone who is high in avoidance goals.

Study 2B

All of the measures of relationship quality in Study 1 and Study 2A were based on self-reports. In Study 2B, the same couples who participated in Study 2A participated in a laboratory study where we videotaped them having discussions about their relationship. Here, we were able to obtain outside observers' ratings of both partners' relationship satisfaction and responsiveness to their partner's needs. We predicted that people with high approach relationship goals would be rated by outside observers as relatively more satisfied and responsive to their partner's needs. In contrast, we predicted that people with high avoidance goals would be rated as relatively less satisfied and responsive to their partner's needs. We also investigated the possibility that the partners of people who are high in approach goals will be rated as more satisfied and responsive, whereas the partners of people who are high in avoidance goals may be rated as less satisfied and responsive. Finally, we predicted that the actor and partner effects of approach and avoidance goals on satisfaction would be mediated by responsiveness.

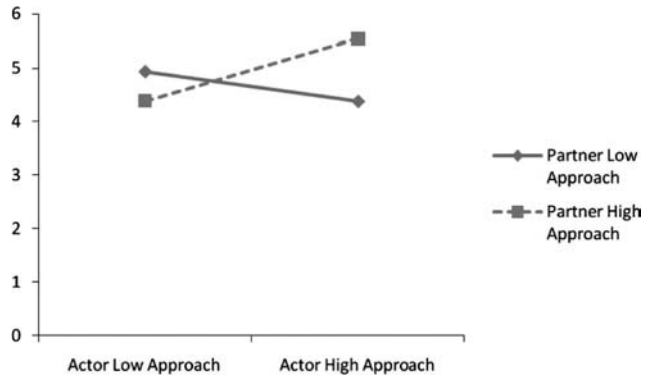

Figure 3. Interaction between both partners' approach relationship goals in predicting relationship satisfaction at the 3-month follow-up, controlling for baseline satisfaction (Study 2A). Note that the means were estimated ± 1 standard deviation on actor and partner approach goals.

Method

Participants and procedure. Couples came to the laboratory, completed several self-report measures, and then participated in several videotaped interactions. Relevant to the current investigation, each partner took a turn in discussing "a time in your life when you felt a lot of love for your partner and how you expressed it." The mean length of the conversations was 3 min, 37 s (*SD* = 1 min, 10 s) with a range of 51 s to 8 min, 22 s. Speaking order for the conversations was randomly assigned through a coin toss. There was no main effect of conversation length for the gender of the partner disclosing.

Couples were seated in two chairs in a private room with the chairs angled to face each other. Two small cameras were mounted on the wall approximately 6 feet (1.83 m) above the ground, with one camera pointed at each participant at an angle to allow for a full frontal recording. The cameras were visible to the couple and captured an image of the participants from the top of their heads to their laps. The cameras were controlled by research assistants in an adjacent control room who could see and hear the activities in the experiment room and communicate with the couples via intercom. Each partner in the couple was paid $20 for taking part in the laboratory portion of the study.

Observer ratings of relationship satisfaction and responsiveness in a semistructured conversation. Three coders independently coded the relationship satisfaction of both partners during both love conversations. The coders indicated the extent to which each partner "feels satisfied with their relationship" on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*). The coders overlapped on 100% of the conversations (αs = .87 and .88 for satisfaction in the two conversations).

Two coders independently coded the listener (i.e., the person who was listening to their partner talk about a time when they felt a great deal of love) for three aspects of responsiveness (i.e., understanding, validation, and caring) using an adaptation of a coding scheme developed by Maisel et al. (2008). Coders indicated the extent to which the listener seems to *understand* their partner's experience of love (i.e., clearly understands the experience their

partner is trying to explain, asks clarifying questions about the experience, nods along with partner, "mmhmm," "I see," reminisces more about the experience), *validate* their partner's experience of love (i.e., acknowledges that it was an important experience, validates that the partner would feel a lot of love in that situation, "that meant a lot for our relationship," "that meant a lot to me too," "I can see why you would have felt a lot of love then," describing times when they felt the same way), and express *caring* toward their partner (i.e., expresses commitment to partner, says "I love you" or other positive things, touches partner, kisses partner, etc.) on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*). Because of the time-intensive nature of the responsiveness coding, the coders overlapped on one third of the conversations to establish reliability for the three components of responsiveness (αs = .79, .70, and .77 for understanding, validation, and caring, respectively). On the basis of previous research (Maisel et al., 2008), we combined the three codes into one overall responsiveness code, and the alpha was .71.

Results

Relationship goals and outside observer ratings of satisfaction and responsiveness. Our central set of hypotheses concerned links between relationship goals and outside observer's ratings of relationship satisfaction and responsiveness to the partner's needs. As discussed previously, we coded the satisfaction of the "talker" and the "listener" and the responsiveness of just the "listener" in the two love conversations. We used SPSS mixed models to address the nested nature of the data (i.e., partners nested within the couple). As shown in Table 3, we received strong support for our hypotheses. Specifically, we found that the higher that people were in approach relationship goals, the more satisfied and responsive they were rated by outside observers (see actor approach goals in Table 3) and the more satisfied and responsive their partners were rated by outside observers (see partner approach goals in Table 3). In addition, the higher people were in avoidance relationship goals, the less satisfied and responsive their partners were rated by outside observers (see partner avoidance goals in Table 3). There was only one significant effect for actor avoidance goals. The higher people were in avoidance relationship goals, the less responsive they were rated by outside observers (see actor avoidance goals in Table 3). It is notable that the associations between relationship goals and coded satisfaction were replicated in the two love conversations: Individuals who were higher in approach goals and their partners were observed as being more satisfied and the partners of people who were higher in avoidance goals were observed as being less satisfied both when they were the "talker" and when they were the "listener." In addition, all of the associations remained significant when controlling for relationship duration as well as both partners' relationship satisfaction and commitment at the baseline of the study. There were never any significant associations with participant gender.

Table 3
Relationship Goals and Coded Satisfaction and Responsiveness (Study 2B)

	Outside observer ratings of relationship quality		
Variable	Satisfaction (talker)	Satisfaction (listener)	Responsiveness (listener)
Actor approach	.86***	.63**	.86***
Partner approach	.35†	.52**	.67**
Actor avoidance	−.21	−.22	−.32*
Partner avoidance	−.34*	−.29*	−.30*

Note. All numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients.
† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

We conducted a final set of analyses to test responsiveness as a mediator of the associations between approach and avoidance goals and relationship satisfaction. Because there was not a significant direct effect of avoidance goals on coded satisfaction, there were then three associations to mediate: the effect of the actor's approach goals on the actor's satisfaction (shown in Figure 4A), the effect of the actor's approach goals on the partner's satisfaction (shown in Figure 4B), and the effect of the actor's avoidance goals on the partner's satisfaction (shown in Figure 4C). Actor responsiveness fully mediated the link between actor approach goals and actor satisfaction (Sobel $z = 2.60$, $p < .01$). Partner responsiveness fully mediated the link between actor approach goals and partner satisfaction, although this effect was marginally significant (Sobel $z = 1.60$, $p = .09$). Finally, partner responsiveness mediated the link between actor avoidance goals and partner satisfaction, although this effect was also marginally significant (Sobel $z = -1.80$, $p = .07$). Although the effects for the latter two mediations are not particularly strong, we should note the difficulty in both detecting partner effects and mediating those effects. In short, studying dyadic interactions in the laboratory enabled us to observe responsiveness as a specific behavior targeted at the partner that accounts for why approach and avoidance goals shape both partners' satisfaction with the relationship.

Discussion

All of the previous research on relationship goals and relationship quality, including Study 1 and Study 2A reported in this investigation, relied on self-report measures of relationship quality. This is the first study to demonstrate that the associations between approach and avoidance relationship goals and relationship quality replicated across outside observers' ratings of both partners' relationship satisfaction and responsiveness during dyadic conversations in the laboratory.

General Discussion

Although many people hope that the love that they feel for their partner will withstand the test of time, many couples experience precipitous declines in intimacy and satisfaction over the course of their relationships. The current set of studies applied an approach-avoidance motivational framework to understand how couples can maintain feelings of satisfaction and closeness in their daily lives and over the course of time. Most broadly, the studies in this article highlight the conceptual gains to be found by extending approach-avoidance models of motivation to phenomena in everyday life (e.g., Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Gable et al., 2000) and are part of an emerging area of research that focuses on approach-avoidance motivation and close relationships (see Gable & Berkman, 2008, for a review).

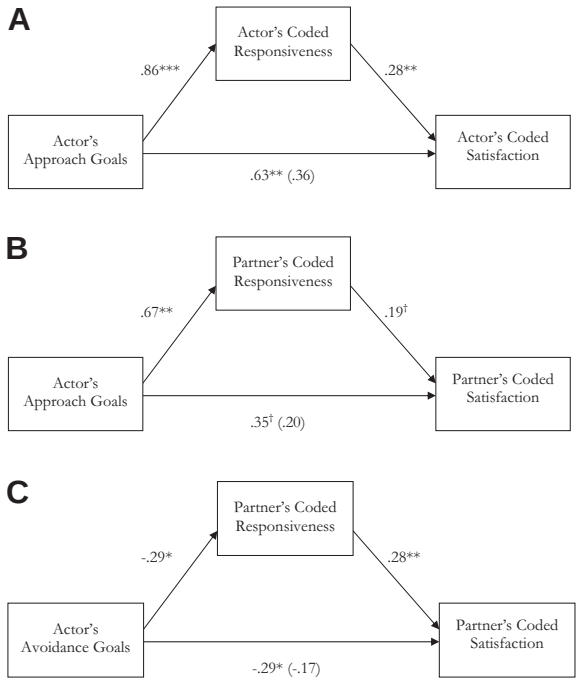

Figure 4. A. Responsiveness as a mediator between the actor's approach relationship goals and the actor's relationship satisfaction (Study 2B). B. Responsiveness as a mediator between the actor's approach relationship goals and the partner's relationship satisfaction (Study 2B). C. Responsiveness as a mediator between the actor's avoidance relationship goals and the partner's relationship satisfaction (Study 2B). Note that all numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients. $^{\dagger}p < .07$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Relationship Goals and Relationship Quality in the Moment and Over Time

The first goal of the current studies was to investigate links between relationship goals and relationship quality in couples' day-to-day interactions as well as over longer periods of time in their relationships. In both studies, individuals who were high in approach relationship goals experienced more relationship satisfaction and closeness in their daily lives. People who were high in approach relationship goals also experienced increases in relationship satisfaction over a 1-month period of time in Study 1 and increases in commitment over a 3-month period of time in Study 2.

Avoidance goals, in contrast, were not associated with daily relationship quality in either of the daily studies. We had anticipated this finding based on existing research showing that negative relational exchanges, such as conflict and disagreement, occur with little frequency on a daily basis (Gable et al., 2003), giving highly avoidant people little opportunity to react to these events with decreased feelings of satisfaction (Gable et al., 2000). Over time, however, everyone is bound to experience negative interactions with a dating partner, giving the people who are high in avoidance goals opportunities to react to them with feelings of decreased satisfaction. Indeed, avoidance goals were associated with decreases in relationship satisfaction over a 1-month period of time in Study 1 and over a 3-month period of time in Study 2. In short, the current studies add to a growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of pursuing approach goals and the costs of avoidance goals in romantic relationships (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Impett, Strachman, et al., 2008).

A Dyadic Perspective on Relationship Goals

Previous research on approach-avoidance motivation and relationships has measured the goals of only one member of the couple, ignoring the influence of the partner's own goals for the relationship or interactions between partners' goals in shaping relationship quality. The current work provides a new dyadic perspective on motivation and relationships. By measuring the relationship goals and relationship quality of both partners in Studies 2A and 2B, this is the first research to document the relational benefits of being in a relationship with a person inclined toward approach goals. The partners of people who were high in approach goals experienced greater satisfaction and closeness on a daily basis and felt more committed and had fewer thoughts about breaking up over a three month period of time than the partners of people with lower approach goals. Further, the partners of people high in approach goals were also rated as relatively more satisfied with the relationship and more responsive to the partner's needs by outside observers, showing that the benefits of being in a relationship with someone high in approach goals extend beyond the use of self-report measures.

The benefits of approach goals were even stronger, as we had anticipated, to the extent that both partners were high in approach goals. That is, although it only took one partner to be high in approach goals for partners to experience satisfaction in their daily lives, across all four of our measures of long-term relationship quality in Study 2B, relationships were even more likely to flourish and thrive to the extent that both partners were high in approach relationship goals. Put another way, if both partners were not committed to pursuing positive experiences, growth and development in the relationship, it was difficult for these couples to maintain high feelings of satisfaction over time. It is possible that over a shorter period of time (such as 1 month in Study 1), one partner who is high in approach goals may be able to "carry" the relationship, but that over a slightly longer period of time (3 months in Study 2), both partners need to be focused on pursuing positive experiences for intimate relationships to thrive.

In contrast to needing both partners to be high in approach goals to maintain satisfying relationships over time, it only took one partner high in avoidance goals to negatively impact the relationship over time, consistent with research showing the powerful toxic effects of negative processes in relationships (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000). In both studies, avoidance goals were associated with decreases in relationship satisfaction over time. The strongest and most consistent pattern of results for avoidance goals concerned effects on the partner. Specifically, the partners of people who were high in avoidance relationship goals experienced lower levels of satisfaction, commitment, and closeness and had more thoughts about breaking up by the 3-month follow-up than the partners of people who were lower in avoidance goals. Further, the partners of high avoidance individuals were also rated as relatively less satisfied and responsive by outside observers during the laboratory conversations about love. These are the first findings that document the costly nature of avoidance goal pursuit for

people's romantic partners. They are consistent with previous work showing that people high in avoidance goals remember more negative social information, are more reactive to negative events, and base their satisfaction on feelings of insecurity (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable et al., 2000; Gable & Poore, 2008; Strachman & Gable, 2006). This chronic focus on avoiding negative outcomes ultimately erodes the partner's feelings of satisfaction and closeness.

The Role of Positive Emotions in Approach-Related Processes

Both studies provided converging support for positive emotions as a mechanism of the link between approach goals and increased daily satisfaction and closeness. Specifically, one reason why people high in approach goals experienced greater feelings of relationship satisfaction is because they experienced more positive emotions on a daily basis. In Study 1, we demonstrated this effect with a measure of general positive affect (Watson et al., 1988). In Study 2, a similar pattern of results was obtained with a measure of more socially relevant emotions, such as gratitude, love, and compassion (Srivastava et al., 2009). Further, not only did people with high approach goals experience more positive emotions but their partners did as well, in turn contributing to enhanced feelings of satisfaction with the relationship and closeness to the partner. More broadly, this research suggests that the positive emotions of recent interest in relationship research (e.g., gratitude, love, and compassion) may be closely associated with the approach motivational system.

These findings give more precision to an understanding of how underlying approach goals produce positive outcomes in relationships: They do so by influencing a primary determinant of satisfaction, the balance of positive emotions the individual (and romantic partner) feels on a daily basis. From a different conceptual vantage point, these findings are also important for the literature on emotion. One of the central theses of the influential broaden-and-build model of positive emotion (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) is that positive emotions build important social resources. The findings from the current studies provide compelling support for how positive emotions build consequential resources in relationships.

Dyadic Interactions in the Laboratory

Previous research on approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships has relied exclusively on self-report measures of relationship quality (Gable, 2006a; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Strachman, et al., 2008). Although the daily reports of relationship quality included in previous research and in the current studies provide a direct window into people's relationships, obtaining outside observers' reports of relationship quality broadens the ecological validity of this body of work. The current work included the first study investigating how relationship goals shape dyadic interactions in the laboratory, thereby enabling us to corroborate self-report findings with outside observers' ratings of relationship quality. Consistent with their focus on creating positive experiences in the relationship, we found that people high in approach goals were rated as relatively more satisfied and responsive to their partner's needs compared with people low in approach goals. In contrast, people high in avoidance goals were rated as less responsive by outside observers but not less satisfied.

These effects even extended to the partner, with the partners of people high in approach goals being rated as more satisfied and responsive. Furthermore, the partners of people who were high in avoidance goals were seen as less satisfied and responsive than the partners of people who were low in avoidance goals. These results are not surprising, as it is likely to be relatively more rewarding to respond to the needs of a partner who is focused on creating positive outcomes in the relationship, but it is relatively hard to respond to the needs of a partner who is chronically focused on avoiding negative outcomes and potentially less open to having their needs responded to (Reis et al., 2004). Overall, the pattern of results in reports by outside observers closely paralleled the self-report results, buttressing our confidence in the overall findings. Finally, responsiveness proved to be an important mechanism by which approach and avoidance goals shaped the relationship satisfaction of both partners in the relationship, providing additional evidence that behavioral responsiveness to a partner's needs is a core feature of satisfying relationships (Reis et al., 2004). It is important to note here that the interaction task itself fell squarely into the approach goal domain (discussing a time of feeling love)—future studies should tap into other types of interaction (e.g., discussing a time when feeling insecure).

Limitations, Future Directions, and Implications

The majority of participants in both studies were college students in relatively new relationships where feelings of satisfaction were quite high. It is possible that the associations between relationship goals and relationship quality may be different in relationships of greater duration and commitment, such as in married couples. For example, during periods of relationship satisfaction decline known to occur in the child-rearing years of a marriage (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markham, 2009), avoidance goals may have less harmful influences on relationship satisfaction than we found in our samples of relatively young, dating couples. Indeed, in one study, perceived support for prevention-focused goals (similar to avoidance goals) was not associated with relationship satisfaction for unmarried couples, but perceived support for prevention-focused goals was positively associated with relationship satisfaction for married couples, for whom the context of the relationship is presumably more maintenance focused (Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). Future research that examines relationships of greater duration and commitment is needed to extend the current work.

Our theoretical framework proposes that relationship goals influence relationship quality, although our findings do not provide a definitive test of this direction of causality. For example, just as pursuing approach goals may lead people to feel more satisfaction and closeness, it is also possible that feeling satisfied, in turn, makes people more likely to pursue positive experiences in their relationships. Our longitudinal findings, in which we control for baseline levels of relationship quality, provide compelling evidence that people with high approach goals experience enhanced relationship quality over time (1 month later in Study 1 and 3 months later in Study 2), whereas people with high avoidance goals report poorer relationship quality over time. Nevertheless, future research in which both approach and avoidance goals are

experimentally manipulated (Strachman & Gable, 2006) would provide a more definitive test of the causal links between approach and avoidance goals and relationship quality.

The results from these two studies document the importance of approach goals for predicting elevated levels of relationship quality on a daily basis and maintaining satisfying relationships over time. The current study does not address the question of whether it is possible for people with chronically low levels of approach goals or high levels of avoidance goals to learn to focus on the positive things to be experienced in their relationships. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, by definition, goals are short-term cognitive representations of wants and fears that should be malleable and sensitive to situational cues (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006a). Moreover, previous research has shown that goals can be experimentally manipulated in the social domain (Strachman & Gable, 2006) and the achievement domain (e.g., Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Experimental evidence for changing people's goals in their romantic relationships has yet to be conducted, but on the basis of theory and previous experimental research, we expect that people's goals in their relationships can and do change over time. Experimentally manipulating relationship goals is a ripe area for future research.

The measures of approach and avoidance goals were also significantly positively correlated in both studies, a finding that is not altogether surprising. At a more basic dispositional level, approach and avoidance tendencies are largely independent. For example, Gray's (1987) behavioral activation and behavioral inhibition systems are uncorrelated (Gable et al., 2000). At the level of goals, however, which are short-term representations of wants and needs, approach and avoidance goals are not independent (see Gable, 2006a). It is likely that proximal social goals tap into both the general importance people place on the social domain and the preferred regulatory focus (approach or avoidance). Another interpretation is that the moderately high correlation between the two types of goals reflects a response set; that is, people may only vary on how strongly they rate the importance of social goals overall. This interpretation is unlikely, however, because approach and avoidance goals showed a different pattern of associations with relationship quality.

More research is also needed to explain why people adopt approach versus avoidance goals in their relationships in the first place. For example, research guided by Gable's (2006a) hierarchical model of social motivation has shown that social goals emerge from underlying temperaments. Specifically, people who are high in the dispositional social motive "hope for affiliation" are more likely to pursue approach social goals, whereas people who are high in the dispositional social motive "fear of rejection" are more likely to pursue avoidance social goals (see also Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Several recent studies point to the important role of attachment orientations in shaping relationship goals (Impett & Gordon, in press; Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008; Locke, 2008). These studies generally show that whereas anxiously attached individuals tend to engage in behaviors to approach rewards and to avoid relationship costs, individuals relatively high in attachment avoidance are less likely to approach rewards in their relationships but are more likely to avoid relationship costs. Social goals are likely to result from other sources as well such as rejection sensitivities (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998) and implicit theories about relationships (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). Additional research is needed to explore other dispositional influences on goal pursuit in the romantic relationship domain.

Concluding Comments

Many people who begin relationships with high hopes of finding lasting love are disappointed when they find that their feelings of satisfaction and intimacy have waned over time. In this article, two studies with multiple methods (i.e., daily experience, short-term longitudinal, and behavioral observation) demonstrated the utility of approach-avoidance motivational theory in helping us to understand the conditions under which couples maintain (or weaken) feelings of satisfaction and closeness, both on a daily basis and over the course of time in their relationships.

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