

Running Head: TRANSACTIVE GOAL DYNAMICS THEORY

**Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory:  
A Discipline-Wide Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

Theories of goal pursuit typically conceptualize goal pursuers as isolated actors; in contrast, empirical research from diverse areas of psychology has demonstrated that goal setting, pursuit, and achievement are deeply embedded within social relationships. Because much of this emerging literature is developing within subfields with minimal cross-talk, the potential for integration and advances to basic theory has not been realized. The present article leverages Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory in an effort to bring these literatures together. In doing so, it distills a common set of primary research questions toward the goal of promoting a cumulative, integrative, interdisciplinary field of research on the ways in which goal pursuit is socially embedded.

**TRANSACTIVE GOAL DYNAMICS THEORY:  
A DISCIPLINE-WIDE PERSPECTIVE**

In everyday life, do people work alone in their cubicles, or together on team projects? Do dieters read healthy cookbooks or ask friends to share recipes? Do students study alone at their desks, or do parents contribute help? The answer to these questions, of course, is both: People pursue goals as individuals, and as members of relationships.

Psychology's historically dominant view of goal pursuit as an individual and independent activity—a child trying to resist a marshmallow, for example—has recently been complemented by research showing goal pursuit's interpersonal and interdependent nature. Although this research is driven by diverse questions from varied subfields within psychology, fundamental commonalities underlie these interdependent goal pursuits.

Transactive Goal Dynamics (TGD) Theory (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & VanDellen, 2015) offers one perspective on those commonalities, exploring interdependence and predicting when and how it determines goal outcomes. In this piece, we use TGD Theory to highlight common principles underlying recent findings from health, educational, organizational, social, and developmental psychology. Our hope is that doing so draws attention to the parallels across subfields, and offers a useful perspective on goal pursuit that may generate new ideas for research.

**TGD THEORY**

TGD Theory conceptualizes goal setting, pursuit, and achievement as multi-level phenomena, occurring both within and by relationships. The theory's key construct is *goal coordination*, the tendency for a social unit to make efficient use of its goal-relevant resources. Instead of predicting goal attainment (e.g., grades, recovery from disease, career promotion) from characteristics of the individual, TGD Theory predicts goal attainment from an interaction of interdependence and goal coordination in that individual's important or domain-relevant

relationships. Good goal outcomes are likeliest to emerge when interdependent partners coordinate well, efficiently drawing on the collective resources afforded by interdependence.

The theory is predicated on the assumption that highly interdependent individuals, whether in dyads or larger groups, function not as separate goal pursuers, but as one self-regulating unit—a *transactive goal system* (see Wegner, 1987). Relationship partners (e.g., romantic partners, coworkers, parents and children, teachers and students) can have such strong interdependence among their goals, pursuits, and outcomes that they become inextricably-linked subparts of one self-regulating system. This system's goal outcomes depend on how well the subparts integrate their actions to form an efficient whole (vanDellen & Baker, 2011). The system can be relevant primarily to specific domains, as for coworkers in a workplace, or across most domains, as for many spouses and family members. Without sufficient interdependence, two partners are better understood as two independent goal pursuers. With such interdependence, however, the two's goal dynamics are better understood as sub-parts of the relationship system.

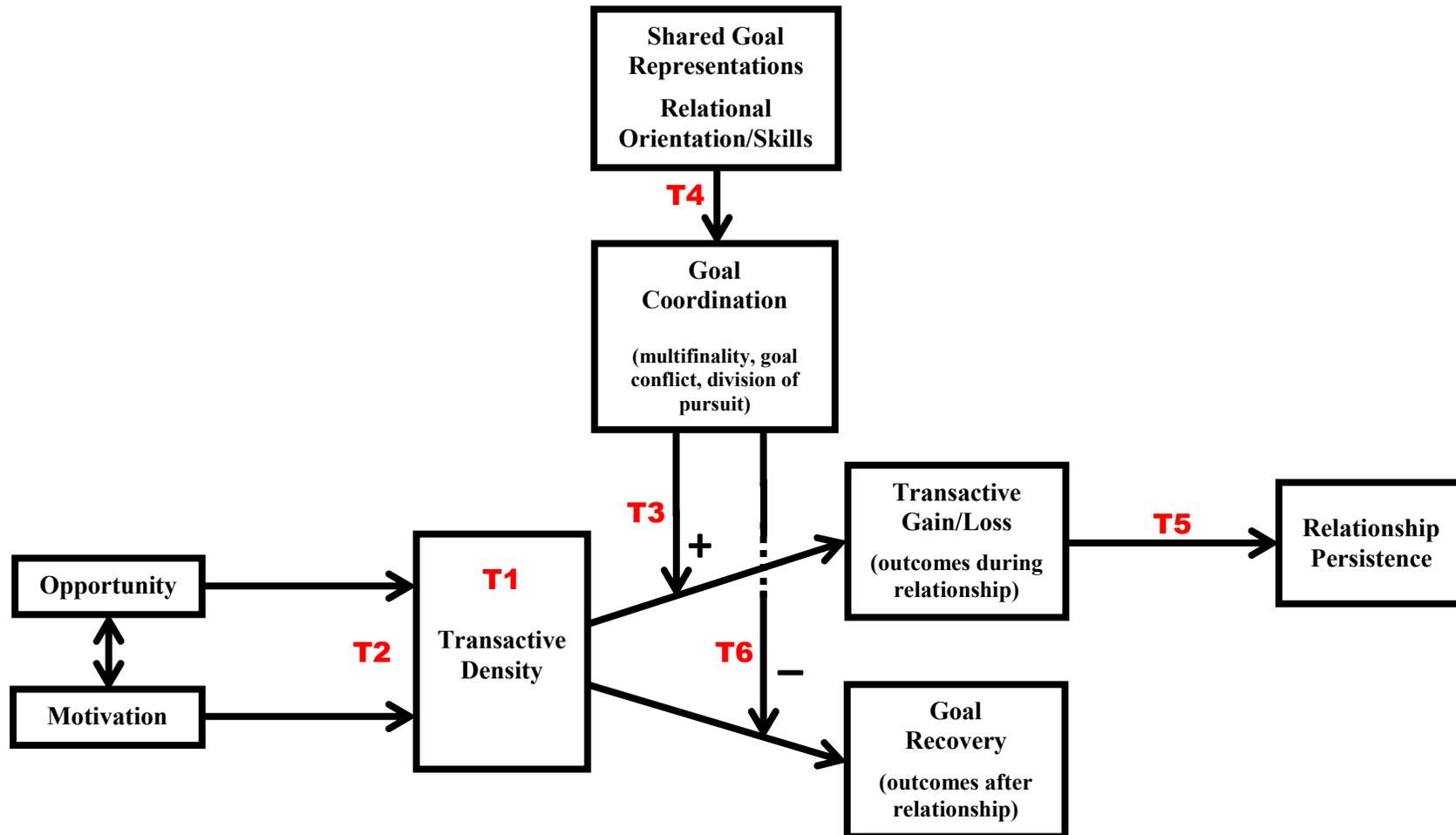
Recent research has found evidence of processes characteristic of transactive goal systems – displaying goal interdependence – across many relationship types and goal domains. In an obesity treatment study, weight changes were strongly correlated in parent-child dyads (Best et al., 2016). Spouses' conscientiousness predicted employees' likelihood of promotion, even after controlling for employees' own conscientiousness (Solomon & Jackson, 2014). Elderly individuals overcame their cognitive impairments when working with their spouse (Rauers, Riediger, Schmiedek, & Lindenberger, 2011). At-risk students' mathematics performance was improved by a teacher with high energy (Klusmann, Richter, & Lüdtkke, 2016). Employees' productivity depended on the match between their own and their coach's motivational orientations (Sue-Chan, Wood, & Latham, 2012; also see Hamstra, Orehek, & Holleman, 2014). Even young children have shown readiness to engage in the kinds of processes that are typical of members of

transactive systems, such as expending effort in joint tasks to advance others' goals (Beier, Over, & Carpenter, 2014; Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2012).

Such examples reveal that some relationship partners, whether teacher-student pairs or spouses, have tight links among their goals, pursuits, and outcomes, to the extent that it is more accurate to conceive of the two as one unit for the purpose of understanding a given goal outcome. Close relationships with broad ranging influence are the focus of TGD Theory, the six tenets of which are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. An overview of Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory.

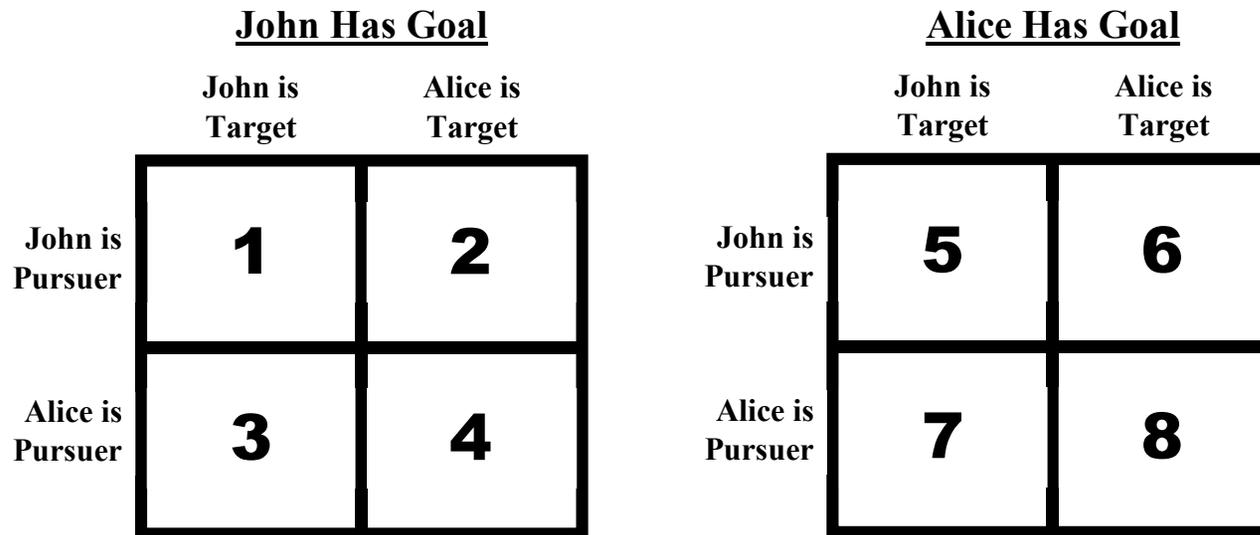
T1 (Tenet 1): Social units, like married couples, work teams, and parent-child dyads, vary in *transactive density* (the interdependence of their daily goal pursuits). T2: Transactive density is determined by opportunity and motivation: Those who have the opportunity and the desire will be likelier to form the very dense relationships the theory calls *transactive goal systems*. T3: *Goal coordination* (the compatibility of partners' goal pursuits) moderates the effect of density on *transactive gain/loss* (goal outcomes resulting from the relationship): Only dense partnerships afford the opportunity to benefit from compatibility with the partner. T4: Shared goal representations (e.g., similar beliefs about who should pursue what goals) and relationship orientation/skills (e.g., the ability to provide each other responsive support) predict goal coordination. T5: Transactive gain/loss predicts relationship persistence: Successful systems will tend to persist over time, while unsuccessful ones will experience conflict and be likelier to dissolve. T6: Goal coordination moderates the effect of transactive density on goal recovery (goal outcomes after the relationship ends): It is the most well-coordinated systems that will suffer the most disruption to goal outcomes when the relationship ends. Figure reprinted with permission from Fitzsimons et al. (2015).



**Tenet 1: The Nature of Goal Interdependence**

Tenet 1 describes the interdependence or *transactive density* within transactive systems, the extent to which dyads/groups have numerous and strong links among members' goals, pursuits, and outcomes. Tenet 1 does not lay out a prediction, but describes the types of goal pursuits that exist within dense systems. According to the tenet, system members hold and pursue not only goals targeted at themselves, but also at their partners and the system, and pursue goals held not only by the self but also by other members of the system. Figure 2 illustrates these variables for a hypothetical dyad.

*Figure 2.* The 3-way structure of goals within TGD systems, as outlined in Tenet 1 of TGD Theory: The figure shows the types of goals and pursuits of a fictional dyad, John and Alice. As shown on the left side of the figure, John can have and pursue goals for himself and for Alice, and Alice can pursue any of John’s goals. The same is true for Alice, as shown on the right. The left vs. right sides of the figure indicate who possesses the goal (John or Alice); the columns indicate the target of the goal (John or Alice), and the rows indicate who pursues the goal. Such cells can also be combined, as when John pursues a goal that he and Alice both hold for Alice (cells 2 and 6), or John and Alice pursue joint goals (cells 3, 4, 7, 8). Figure reprinted with permission from Fitzsimons et al. (2015).



The existence of these extra-individual goals and pursuits is central to TGD theory. Many examples have been documented in recent research. For example, romantic partners expended effort for each other's success (Kappes & Shrout, 2011); parents pursued their adolescents' diabetes management goals (Berg et al., 2013); elderly couples pursued joint goals (Schindler et al., 2010). Research is thus accumulating on the ubiquity of goals and pursuits not oriented toward the self, but toward others, and demonstrating the existence of several of the types of goals and pursuits outlined in Tenet 1. Further exploring the role of such goals, in addition to the usual self-oriented goals, is crucial to the understanding of real-life goal outcomes (Howland et al., 2016).

### **Tenet 2: Predicting Goal Interdependence**

Tenets 2-6 outline the key predictions of TGD Theory. According to Tenet 2, relationships are likely to develop into dense transactive goal systems when the opportunity and motivation to do so are high (unless constrained by external factors). The role of *opportunity* has not yet received much empirical attention, but evidence for the role of *motivation* is accumulating (Wageman & Gordon, 2005). For example, people with low self-control showed particular interest in interdependence with high self-control others, presumably because they hoped to benefit from the others' self-control resources (Shea, Davisson, & Fitzsimons, 2013). At this point, the state of evidence for Tenet 2 is relatively weak; studying both motivation and opportunity could be useful to researchers seeking to understand when and why certain others, like peers, teachers, or parents, affect goal outcomes and thus could be a fruitful avenue for future research.

### **Tenet 3: Goal Coordination**

According to Tenet 3, the effect of goal coordination on goal outcomes depends on the system's density/interdependence. In TGD Theory, goal outcomes are conceptualized in terms of *transactive gain vs. loss*, the extent to which involvement in the social unit produces greater goal success than the individuals would have achieved independently. Well-coordinated systems are

those whose partners (a) efficiently act to accomplish both parties' goals, (b) possess and pursue goals that facilitate rather than conflict with each other, and (c) divide tasks to leverage each person's resources.

Evidence from diverse subfields suggests that the link between goal coordination and goal achievement is robust. Mothers and adolescents more successfully regulated Type I diabetes when they enjoyed smooth collaboration in goal pursuit; elderly spouses more successfully regulated Type II diabetes when they had low goal conflict; romantic couples made more goal progress when their goals facilitated one another (e.g., Berg, Schindler, & Maharajh, 2008; Gere & Impett, in press; Henry, Rook, Stephens, & Franks, 2013).

Evidence also supports the tenet's Transactive Density  $\times$  Goal Coordination interaction, which suggests that coordination is influential only for systems with sufficient density to be shaped by coordination's benefits and costs (Swaab, Schaerer, Anicich, Ronay, & Galinsky, 2014). Levine, Hoffer, and Chen (2017) found support for Tenet 3 in the context of immunological inflammation among adolescents. In a daily diary, participants reported on how frequently their family made demands on their time, completed interviews that assessed family closeness, and underwent a blood draw that measured inflammatory markers. Adolescents who reported frequent family demands (in TGD terms, a form of poor coordination, in which others' actions conflicted with adolescents' ability to pursue their goals) exhibited worse inflammatory profiles as indicated by higher cytokine production. However, this pattern was limited to families in which family members reported high levels of closeness.

This study offers support for TGD Theory's hypothesis that the link between goal coordination (as operationalized by family demands) and outcomes (as operationalized by immunological functioning) is stronger with greater transactive density (as operationalized by family closeness). Goal outcomes are maximized when systems are highly interdependent and

coordinate well, and minimized when systems are highly interdependent and coordinate poorly.

Tenet 3 may be helpful as scholars seek to further understand the complex interactions of relationship characteristics and goal processes that predict goal outcomes (see Theiss & Solomon, 2006).

#### **Tenet 4: Predicting Goal Coordination**

According to Tenet 4, goal coordination is predicted by shared goal representations and relationship orientation and skills.

##### ***Shared goal representations***

Rather than emphasizing shared views on high-level constructs like religion and politics, the theory emphasizes shared views on more mundane everyday behaviors, like who does what, who should do what, and how they should do it. When partners agree about what goals are important for each to pursue, and how each partner should pursue their goals, their day-to-day coordination is smoother and more positive, ultimately producing better goal outcomes. Thus, in TGD theory, shared goal representations are the cognitive precursors to the development of effective coordination behaviors.

Research has supported this role for shared goal representations. People are more successful at increasing physical activity when they set joint if-then plans with their romantic partner about precisely how to do so (Prestwich et al., 2012). Similarly, people are more successful on smoking and weight loss goals when their partner also shares these goals, especially if their partner is also at the same stage of goal progress (Jackson, Steptoe, & Wardle, 2015). Such effects become stronger as transactive density increases. For example, the positive effects of shared target-oriented goals on everyday collaboration among older married couples are stronger among couples with more (vs. less) frequent collaboration in day-to-day life (Schindler et al., 2010). These studies tend to imply, rather than measure, coordination as a mediator of the effects

of shared representations on goal outcomes; future work looking more directly at the mediating role of coordination behaviors would be useful.

### ***Goal responsiveness***

Even the best-intentioned goal support is risky. Health, education, and relationships researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that support can be counter-productive (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015; Neff & Karney, 2005). For example, although parents' general emotional support had positive effects on teens' academic goal pursuit and outcomes, parents' direct academic support had mixed effects, and actually increased test anxiety (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015). Similarly, spouses' support of HIV patients' goals to take their medications actually led to reduced self-efficacy when patients had doubts about their spouse's willingness to sacrifice for the relationship (VanderDrift, Ioerger, Mitzel, & Venable, 2017). Male sleep apnea patients adhered better to medical advice, following CPAP machine protocol, when they saw their wives as providing *support*, but worse when they saw their wives as providing *pressure* (Baron et al., 2011)

TGD Theory suggests one important factor that may play a role in these effects: the support's *goal responsiveness*. When partners offer each other goal-relevant support, that support should be responsive to the partner's current goals, efficacy, resources, and desired interdependence (Finkel, 2017; Reis, Lemay, & Finkenauer, 2017). Indeed, Wilson, Martire, and Sliwinski (in press) recently showed that patient outcomes depended on whether spouses adjusted their day-to-day behavior to patient pain levels. This is a form of goal-responsive support: As the patient feels more pain and needs more help, the spouse offers more; as the patient feels less pain and needs less help, the spouse offers less. Tenet 4 suggests that if partners (parents, spouses, teachers) adjust their behavior to each other's goal-relevant states (e.g., pain level, fatigue, expectations), they can offer more effective support. Thus, measuring the goal-relevant states of both partners would be very useful in predicting goal outcomes across domains.

**Tenet 5: Goal Success Predicts Relationship Continuation**

Tenet 5 states that voluntary relationships will last longer when the partners achieve transactive gain. Although the theory specifies multiple mechanisms through which goal success will lead partners to persist with their relationships, little work has studied these effects. However, one study has supported the role of one of the mechanisms—increased subjective happiness with the partner. In a dyadic study, romantic partners who were more (vs. less) successful on their own goals during a one-week period showed a greater pre-to-post increase in satisfaction with their partner (Hofmann, Finkel, and Fitzsimons, 2015), pointing to one route through which goal success promotes relationship maintenance.

**Tenet 6: Post-Relationship Performance**

Many relationships come to an end. Tenet 6 examines post-relationship goal outcomes, positing that those partnerships that are particularly effective together will experience the worst post-relationship goal outcomes. Support for this tenet comes from a longitudinal study of romantic relationships after breakup (Gomillion, Murray, & Lamarche, 2015). For individuals with helpful partners, breakup negatively affected goal outcomes; in contrast, for individuals with unhelpful partners, breakup actually had a nonsignificantly positive effect on their goal outcomes. In the context of professional relationships, a similar finding has been demonstrated: When elite scientists died at the peak of their careers, their co-authors published fewer papers in the ensuing years, while other scientists filled this gap by publishing more papers (Azoulay, Fons-Rosen, and Zivin, 2015). After a well-coordinated and successful relationship ends, individuals need to disentangle themselves from their routines of interdependence, and discover new ways to pursue their goals.

## CONCLUSION

Health, education, family, and organizational researchers have long known and repeatedly demonstrated that in people's everyday lives, goal outcomes are social phenomena. Whether psychologists study teenagers' diabetes outcomes, middle-schoolers' learning outcomes, elderly patients' medical adherence, or employees' career success, they find robust evidence for the importance of interpersonal processes. Given the diversity of these findings, it is clear that any satisfactory understanding of real-world goal outcomes requires a sophisticated theoretical analysis of individuals' social embeddedness. And yet, the dominant theories of goal pursuit adopt an individual level of analysis, depicting people as self-regulators who enact self-control in pursuit of self-oriented goals. As a result, researchers who study life outside of the laboratory have tended to develop domain-specific hypotheses about interpersonal processes in goal outcomes, or to rely on non-goal-based theories such as those explaining support and interdependence.

TGD Theory aims to provide an overarching and domain-general theory for psychological researchers, whether they are interested in predicting healthy glucose levels or good math grades. With a particular focus on how people coordinate their goals to effectively draw on shared resources, the theory provides psychologists from across our varied subfields with a common lexicon to address a coherent set of questions, and could help generate new directions for research within each subfield. Such an integrated approach would promote a cumulative, integrative, interdisciplinary field of research that can not only advance scholarship, but also promote the development of theory-based interventions to help people enjoy happier, healthier, and more successful lives.

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