Article

Broadening your horizon one day at a time: Relationship goals and exciting activities as daily antecedents of relational self-expansion

Cheryl Harasymchuk[1] , **Amy Muise**[2], **Chantal Bacev-Giles**[1], **Judith Gere**[3], and **Emily A. Impett**[4]

Abstract

Self-expansion in intimate relationships (i.e., broadening one's perspective through engaging in novel, exciting activities with a partner) has been associated with relationship benefits. The goal of this study was to propose a motivational model of self-expansion to understand what prompts people to engage in self-expanding activities in their relationship on a daily basis. We hypothesized that when people report stronger daily approach relationship goals (i.e., goals focused on pursuing growth, intimacy, and rewards), they would report a greater likelihood of engaging in novel, exciting activities that enhance self-expansion and ultimately promote greater satisfaction in romantic relationships. To test our model, we recruited 122 couples for a 3-week daily diary study. In support of our hypotheses, on days when people (or their partners) reported higher than their usual approach relationship goals, they reported higher relational self-expansion, which was due, in part, to a greater likelihood of engaging in novel, exciting activities with the partner. In turn, higher relational self-expansion was associated with

[1] Carleton University, Canada
[2] York University, Canada
[3] Kent State University, USA
[4] University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada

Corresponding author:
Cheryl Harasymchuk, Department of Psychology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, Canada.
Email: cheryl.harasymchuk@carleton.ca

higher daily relationship satisfaction. Our findings have implications for understanding what promotes relationship growth on a day-to-day basis and the outcomes of daily approach-oriented relationship goals.

Keywords

Approach relationship goals, daily diary methods, intimate relationships, relationship maintenance, self-expansion

Self-expansion in intimate relationships—that is, broadening one's perspective as a result of engaging in novel, exciting experiences with a partner—has been associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Aron & Aron 1986, 1996; Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019). Although opportunities for self-expansion are numerous in the early stages of relationships as partners are getting to know each other and are having many novel, exciting experiences together, opportunities for self-expansion tend to decline with increased relationship duration. However, this decline is not inevitable, and some long-term couples continue to experience self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1986). Researchers have begun to investigate why some couples are more successful than others at maintaining high levels of self-expansion and the associated feelings of relationship satisfaction. For instance, in a nationally representative study of adults in the U.S., people who reported being more intensely in love reported more self-expansion related activities (e.g., novel, exciting, challenging activities) than those who were less intensely in love, suggesting that higher self-expansion might be one factor that distinguishes happier from less happy couples (O'Leary et al., 2012). However, we do not yet know what is associated with instigating higher self-expansion in daily life. In the current article, we draw upon a growing body of research on approach and avoidance social motivation (see review by Gable & Impett, 2012) to test the hypothesis that when individuals report stronger approach relationship goals—that is, when they are focused on pursuing growth, intimacy, and rewards—they will report a greater likelihood of engaging in novel, exciting activities that enhance self-expansion and ultimately promote greater satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Self-expansion

According to self-expansion theory, people have an innate desire to grow, that is, to expand the self-concept (i.e., adopting insights and perspectives that alter and add layers to one's identity) through the acquisition of novel experiences and information (Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996; see Aron et al., 2013, for a review). At a cognitive level, self-expansion represents a broadening of the self-concept and it can occur in many contexts (e.g., traveling, visiting museums, meeting new people, trying new hobbies, and learning new information). One key source of self-expansion is involvement in a romantic relationship (Aron & Aron, 1986). In a burgeoning relationship, people are often learning a great deal of new information about their partner and possibly learning about their own preferences and interests. That is, in the early stages of relationships,

opportunities for self-expansion are numerous as partners are likely to have many novel, exciting experiences together. But, over time in a relationship, self-expansion tends to decline, and low levels of relational self-expansion are associated with greater thoughts of infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006), attraction to alternatives (VanderDrift et al., 2010), and relational boredom (Harasymchuk et al., 2020).

Despite normative declines in self-expansion in relationships, research shows that long-term couples still experience boosts in self-expansion in their relationships. In two daily experience studies of romantic couples, Muise and colleagues (2019) assessed daily relational self-expansion and found that people experience daily fluctuations in their level of self-expansion. The implication of this finding for researchers is that they can assess what precedes and follows the heightened daily levels of relational self-expansion. For instance, Muise and colleagues (2019) also found that daily fluctuations in relational self-expansion were associated with corresponding increases in relationship satisfaction and sexual desire.

Motivational model of self-expansion

What we do not yet know are the factors that can act as *catalysts* for daily relational self-expansion. One key factor that has been shown to promote a sense of self-expansion is the pursuit of approach relationship goals—that is, goals that are focused on promoting positive outcomes in the relationship (Impett et al., 2008, 2010). In the current study, we build upon previous research on self-expansion and relationship goals to test a motivational model of self-expansion. Specifically, we test the prediction that higher daily approach relationship goals are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in novel, exciting activities and, in turn, this is linked to greater self-expansion and satisfaction in relationships.

Approach and avoidance relationship goals. Individual differences in motivation are commonly distinguished based on people's desires to seek out rewards versus avoid punishments (Gable, 2006; see Gable & Impett, 2012, for a review). In the context of relationships, there are important individual differences in the extent to which people pursue *approach relationship goals* (i.e., goals focused on achieving positive outcomes such as intimacy and growth) and *avoidance relationship goals* (i.e., goals focused on avoiding negative outcomes such as rejection and conflict; Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2010; Mattingly et al., 2012), but these goals also vary from day to day (e.g., Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). In other words, there are both relatively stable individual differences in relationship goals (i.e., some people tend to be higher on certain relationship goals than others), as well as state-like variation in goals (i.e., people's relationship goals can fluctuate from day to day).

Effects of goals on outcomes. Individual differences in goal pursuit have been linked to people's own relational outcomes *and* their partners' outcomes. More specifically, there is a growing body of evidence that shows that people with higher approach relationship goals experience more positive relationship outcomes such as higher relationship satisfaction and closeness (assessed over a 2-week period and as rated by observers;

Impett et al., 2010), greater responsiveness toward their romantic partner (Impett et al., 2010), greater sexual desire over a 6-month period (Impett et al., 2008), and more effective (i.e., more satisfying, less conflict-ridden) forms of sacrifice in relationships (Impett et al., 2005, 2014). Furthermore, people's approach relationship goals are associated with their *partners* feeling happier in the relationship (e.g., satisfaction, Impett et al., 2010, 2014; relationship quality, Muise et al., 2013). In contrast, avoidance relationship goals have been associated with lower relationship satisfaction over time (Impett et al., 2010, 2014), as well as lower observed responsiveness to a partner in an in-lab interaction for both the self and the partner (Impett et al., 2010). Thus, a person's relationship goals are associated with relationship outcomes for both partners, highlighting the importance of assessing both partners' motivation.

   Link between goals and self-expansion. Approach-related goals—but not avoidance goals—have been theoretically and empirically linked to self-expansion. For instance, there is initial support from a sample of individuals in the early stage of their relationship that higher approach-related sacrifice motives in relationships are associated with greater relational self-expansion, whereas avoidance-related sacrifice motives were not associated with self-expansion in the relationship (Mattingly et al., 2012).

   Although much has been learned about relationship goals as a trait (i.e., between-person variation; e.g., Impett et al., 2010; Mattingly et al., 2012), limited research has focused on state variation in relationship goals. When state (i.e., within-person) variation in relationship goals has been studied, it has been limited to goals for particular areas of the relationship such as sacrifice (Impett et al., 2013, 2014) and sexual experiences (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). Our objective was to examine whether state variation in relationship goals, particularly approach relationship goals, could help to explain when couples might be better at maintaining self-expansion in their relationship, namely when they engage in more novel, exciting activities in their day-to-day lives that promote self-expansion.

Exciting couple activities. Although opportunities for self-expansion generally decline over time in a relationship, it is possible for couples to sustain self-expansion by engaging in shared, exciting activities (see Aron et al., 2013 for a review). Exciting activities in long-term relationships have been associated with benefits for the relationship, including higher relationship satisfaction and sexual desire (e.g., Aron et al., 2000; Muise et al., 2019; Reissman et al., 1993). More specifically, couple activities that are novel, arousing, and exciting have been found to increase relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 2000; Carson et al., 2007; Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Reissman et al., 1993). For instance, in a series of studies, participants who engaged in an obstacle course task together that was novel and arousing (i.e., partners were velcroed together and creatively moved a foam cylinder through an obstacle course) had higher levels of subsequent relationship satisfaction than those in a control group (who played a mundane activity involving a ball; Aron et al., 2000). In another study, when couples engaged in exciting activities together each week over a 10-week period, they reported feeling more satisfied with their relationship than couples in a no-activity control group or even couples who engaged in pleasant activities together (Reissman et al., 1993). In addition, couples who participated
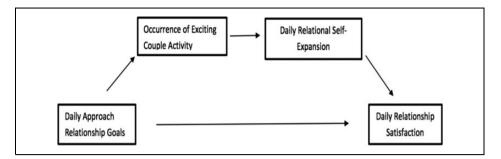
Figure 1. Motivational model of self-expansion.

in an online excitement intervention for their relationship (i.e., couple members jointly created a list of 10 shared activities that had qualities such as novelty, excitement, interest, and challenge) for 90 min a week (over 4 weeks) displayed increased positive affect, excitement, and relationship satisfaction 4 weeks later compared to those in a control group (Coulter & Malouff, 2013). Research has also shown that exciting activities that naturally occur in the context of couples' daily lives have relationship benefits. For instance, couples who were randomly contacted throughout the day over a 1-week period reported experiencing greater relationship quality when they engaged in conjoint and activating activities (i.e., activities in which they felt alert, involved, excited, and active) versus less activating activities (Graham, 2008).

In sum, the experience of engaging in exciting activities has been linked with increased relationship satisfaction when researchers have studied couples in the lab (e.g., Aron et al., 2000), when they engage in researcher-directed "take-home" interventions (e.g., Coulter & Malouff, 2013; Reissman et al., 1993) and in the context of people's daily lives (Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019). There is also some evidence that engaging in an exciting couple activity (i.e., a date) is associated with higher relational self-expansion (Harasymchuk & Walker, 2018). However, it is not clear what promotes the initiation of these exciting activities in relationships. We propose that the *approach goals* that people report pursuing in their romantic relationships on a daily basis will shape the occurrence of exciting activities, which in turn will shape relational self-expansion and satisfaction.

Overview of the study and hypotheses

The goal of the current study is to examine the role of daily relationship goals and daily occurrences of exciting activities in shaping daily fluctuations in relational self-expansion. We predicted that fluctuations in daily approach relationship goals would be associated with greater relational self-expansion through greater participation in exciting couple activities. In turn, we expected greater daily self-expansion to be associated with higher relationship satisfaction. These predictions are displayed in a conceptual model (see Figure 1).

For avoidance goals, past research has found that individual differences in these types of goals were not associated with self-expansion experiences (Mattingly et al.,

2012). As such, we treated avoidance relationship goals as a control variable in our model.

To test our motivational model of self-expansion, we conducted a 21-day daily diary study with couples which offered several methodological advantages. First, experience sampling methods (i.e., daily diary) provide a useful tool to examine relationship events as they unfold in people's everyday lives and allowed us to assess relationship experiences in a context that is more natural and is closer to the time that the experience occurs (i.e., reducing retrospective bias; Algoe et al., 2010; Bolger et al., 2003; Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005; Reis, 1994). Second, by studying couples, we were able to test the role of both partners' daily approach goals in shaping expansion-related experiences. More specifically, we examined the influence of an individual's *daily* relationship goals (i.e., within-person differences) on their own reports of exciting couple activities, relational self-expansion, and relationship satisfaction in daily life over a 3-week period. Additionally, we assessed whether exciting couple activities, relational self-expansion, and relationship satisfaction are shaped not only by a person's own relationship goals but also by their *partner's* goals.

In addition to the methodological benefits, our work also has the potential to advance self-expansion theory. For instance, we are contributing knowledge about what promotes increased relational self-expansion, that is, the daily antecedents that shape this experience. Past work on self-expansion in relationships has focused on the consequences or, rather, the proposed outcomes of self-expansion experiences (i.e., increased relationship quality). Our model investigates a motivational model of self-expansion and tests whether daily approach relationship goals are an antecedent of daily feelings of relational self-expansion through a greater occurrence of exciting shared activities in the relationship.

Method

Participants

Couples who lived together ($n = 122$) were recruited through advertisements on the websites Reddit and Kijiji across five major Canadian cities as well as through advertisements posted in various locations (e.g., libraries, community centers, coffee shops) around a major Canadian city. We restricted participation to couples who were in an exclusive, monogamous relationship, had been together for at least 2 years, were currently living together, and in which both couple members agreed to participate. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 ($M_{age} = 31.53$, $SD = 9.46$) and reported being in their current relationship for approximately 8 years ($M = 8.24$ years, $SD = 7.10$ years, range $= 2$–48 years). More than half of the couples were married or engaged (56.2% were married, 21.6% were engaged) and 11 were same-sex couples. Approximately one quarter of the couples had children (22.8%), and, of these, couples had one or two children on average ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.64$). The majority of the participants were White/European (78.3%), followed by Latin American (6.8%), East Asian (4.3%), South Asian (2.6%), Black/African (2.1%), and 6.0% were bi- or multiethnic/racial or self-identified as "other."

Measures and procedure

Participants were prescreened for eligibility via e-mail and telephone. After both couple members agreed to participate, each partner was e-mailed a unique link to the survey. Each partner first completed a 55-min background survey and then completed a brief 10- to 15-min survey every evening for the next consecutive 21 days. Participants were instructed to complete the survey before bed (although they had access to the survey between 5 p.m. and 9 a.m. the next morning) as well as to do so individually and not to discuss their responses with one another. Each partner was paid up to CAD$55 for participating; payment was prorated depending on the number of daily surveys completed. Participants completed a total of 4,773 diary entries for an average of 19.56 (out of 21) entries per person (see Muise et al., 2019, Study 1 for further details). To achieve our high compliance rate, we adopted several strategies including screening phone calls to each couple member, prorating the compensation for daily participation (i.e., more days completed, the more money they received), drawing incentives for a chance to win a CAD$100 Amazon gift certificate, and sending reminder e-mails if daily surveys were missed.

Daily-level measures. Each day for 21 days, participants completed measures assessing their daily relationship goals, the degree to which they experienced relational self-expansion (i.e., self-expansion due to their partner), and the occurrence of an exciting activity with the partner.[1] To assess *daily relationship goals*, participants completed a modified 2-item approach goal measure ("I tried to make my partner happy today" and "I tried to create more satisfaction in our relationship today") and a 2-item avoidance goal measure ("I tried to prevent my partner from feeling upset today" and I tried to avoid conflict in our relationship today; Gable 2006a; see also Impett et al., 2008). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from $1 = $ *strongly disagree* to $7 = $ *strongly agree* ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.40$, $R_C = .81$ for approach relationship goals and $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.74$, $R_C = .78$ for avoidance relationship goals).[2] For *daily relational self-expansion*, we used a modified, 6-item version of the Self-Expansion Questionnaire that was customized for daily assessments, including "Did you feel a greater awareness of things because of your partner?," "How much did being with your partner expand your sense of the kind of person you are?" and "How much did you feel you gained a larger perspective of things because of your partner?" Items were rated on a 7-point scale from $1 = $ *strongly disagree* to $7 = $ *strongly agree* ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.79$, $R_C = .91$; Muise et al., 2019). The *occurrence of a specific exciting couple activity* was assessed each day; participants were first asked to indicate "yes" or "no" to the following question

> Thinking about your responses to the questions above, can you think of a specific activity that you did with YOUR ROMANTIC PARTNER TODAY that resulted in you feeling a sense of excitement, a greater awareness of things around you, an expansion of your sense of self, and/or an increased knowledge of yourself and the world around you?

If they answered yes, they were asked to describe the activity. On average, participants reported engaging in approximately four exciting couple activities over the course of the

21-day study period ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 3.44$, range $= 0$–17). Examples of the exciting activities reported by participants include "we found and tried an amazing local Italian deli," "went to a concert," and "moved into a new home that we purchased together." To assess *relationship satisfaction*, participants completed a single item from the Perceived Relationship Quality Component inventory, "How satisfied are you with your relationship?," on a 7-point scale from $1 = $ *not at all* to $7 = $ *extremely* ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.17$; Fletcher et al., 2000). Finally, to rule out alternative explanations for our effects, we asked participants each day to report on their *positive affect* with 3 items: "happy, pleased, joyful," "interested, attentive," and "amused, having fun" (adapted from Impett et al., 2010) rated on a 7-point scale from $1 = $ *not at all* to $7 = $ *very much* ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.41$, $R_C = .88$) and the *amount of time they spent with their partner*: "Approximately, how much time did you spend with your partner today (*hours, minutes*)?" from $1 = $ *less than 1 hour* to $8 = $ *more than 7 hours* ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 2.30$), signifying that people spent approximately 4–6 hrs, on average with their partner per day.

Results

Data analysis strategy

To test our larger model, we conducted multilevel serial mediation path analyses using the software Mplus (Muise & Muthén, 1998), which allowed us to set up our path model while accounting for the interdependence in our data (i.e., days nested within partners and couples). All of the continuous daily predictor variables were person-centered in our analysis, whereas the exciting couple activity participation variable was dummy coded ($1 = $ *participated in an exciting couple activity*, $0 = $ *did not participate in an exciting couple activity*). Exogenous variables (i.e., variables that do not have any predictors in the model such as both partners' daily approach and avoidance relationship goals) were allowed to covary freely with one another. The model for analysis is shown in Figure 2. Both actor and partner daily approach relationship goals were expected to independently predict whether the actor reported participating in an exciting couple activity on a given day, the actor's daily relational self-expansion, and the actor's daily relationship satisfaction. Actor reports of whether they participated in an exciting couple activity that day were expected to predict actor daily relational self-expansion, which, in turn, was expected to predict actor daily relationship satisfaction. A direct path between participation in an exciting couple activity and daily relationship satisfaction was also added. We included both actor and partner daily avoidance relationship goals as control variables in our model to account for their associations with approach relationship goals and relationship satisfaction. Given that we were interested in whether daily approach relationship goals were indirectly associated with daily relationship satisfaction through participation in exciting couple activities and higher experiences of daily relational self-expansion, we tested the indirect effects for both actor and partner daily approach relationship goals. We used the following fit indices to evaluate the overall goodness of fit of the data to the model: nonsignificant model χ^2, comparative fit index (CFI) value above .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below .05, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) below .08 (Kline, 2016). We report the
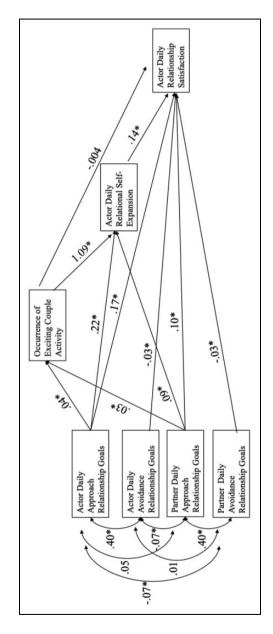
Figure 2. Model for analysis. *p < .05.

Table 1. Zero-order correlations.

	M (SD)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Actor approach goals (1)	5.05 (1.40)						
Partner approach goals (2)		.05					
Actor self-expansion (3)	3.07 (1.79)	.24	.13				
Actor satisfaction (4)	6.13 (1.17)	.24	.14	.25			
Actor avoidance goals (5)	3.64 (1.74)	.35	−.06	.06	.03		
Partner avoidance goals (6)		−.06	.35	.01	−.02	.009	

Note. All measures rated on a 7-point scale.

unstandardized estimates and their corresponding standard errors, 95% confidence intervals (CI), and p values for each of the model estimates (see Table 1 for zero-order correlations) and provide estimates of standardized estimates for an indication of effect sizes.

Testing the model

Our key prediction was that daily approach relationship goals would be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in an exciting couple activity, which, in turn, would be associated with greater daily relational self-expansion and relationship satisfaction. Overall, our data fit the hypothesized model well, χ^2 (4) = 8.44, p = .077, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .015, SRMR = .009. In line with our key hypotheses, both daily actor approach relationship goals (b = 0.04, SE = .01, p < .001, CI [0.03, 0.06], β = .11) and daily partner approach relationship goals (b = 0.03, SE = .01, p < .001, CI [0.02, 0.05], β = .09) predicted daily participation in an exciting couple activity. Participating in an exciting couple activity, as expected, predicted higher daily actor relational self-expansion (b = 1.09, SE = .07, p < .001, CI [0.96, 1.23], β = .39), and higher daily actor relational self-expansion predicted higher daily actor relationship satisfaction (b = 0.14, SE = .02, p < .001, CI [0.10, 0.17], β = .19). Importantly, the indirect effect between daily actor approach relationship goals and daily actor relationship satisfaction, through exciting couple activity participation and relational self-expansion, was significant (b = 0.007, SE = .001, p < .001, CI [0.004, 0.009], β = .008), as was the indirect path between daily *partner* approach relationship goals and daily actor relationship satisfaction (b = 0.005, SE = .001, p < .001, CI [0.003, 0.008], β = .007). In addition, both daily actor approach (b = 0.22, SE = .04, p < .001, CI [0.15, 0.29], β = .20) and partner approach relationship goals (b = 0.09, SE = .03, p = .001, CI [0.04, 0.14], β = .08) independently predicted higher daily relational self-expansion. Daily actor approach (b = 0.17, SE = .02, p < .001, CI [0.13, 0.21], β = .21) and partner approach relationship goals (b = 0.10, SE = .02, p < .001, CI [0.07, 0.13], β = .12) also independently predicted higher daily actor relationship satisfaction. Both daily actor avoidance (b = −0.03, SE = .01, p = .007, CI [−0.06, −0.01], β = −.05) and partner avoidance relationship goals (b = −0.03, SE = .01, p = .017, CI [−0.06, −0.01], β = −.05) also independently predicted lower daily actor relationship satisfaction. Participating in an exciting couple activity did not have any remaining direct effects on actor daily

relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.004$, $SE = .03$, $p = .89$, $\beta = -.002$). Regarding the associations between partners' daily relationship goals, actor and partner avoidance relationship goals were not associated significantly with each other ($b = 0.01$, $SE = .04$, $p = .78$, $\beta = .01$), nor were actor and partner approach relationship goals ($b = 0.05$, $SE = .03$, $p = .08$, $\beta = .05$), although this latter effect was marginal. However, one partner's approach relationship goals were negatively associated with the other partner's avoidance goals ($b = -0.07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .010$, CI $[-0.12, -0.02]$, $\beta = -.06$) and for each member of the couple, their own approach relationship goals were associated with their own avoidance relationship goals ($b = 0.40$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, CI $[0.31, 0.50]$, $\beta = .35$).[3]

Ruling out alternative explanations and generalizability

We wanted to assess whether our findings for goals and the occurrence of exciting couple activities were simply due to the level of positive affect experienced that day. To do so, we reanalyzed our data, by statistically controlling for the level of positive affect experienced that day. The overall pattern of our results remained unchanged when controlling for the amount of daily positive affect. Additionally, when we controlled for the amount of time spent with the partner on the given day, we found that the pattern of results was unaffected.[4] To assess the generalizability of our findings, we assessed lagged analyses but did not find any significant effects (i.e., the effects were confined to the same day, rather than extending to the next day). Theoretically, we would expect that the strongest predictor of people's activities on a given day would be their motivation on that day, rather than their motivation on the previous day.[5]

Discussion

Although there is mounting evidence for the benefits of relational self-expansion (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996; Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Muise et al., 2019), we know very little about the factors that lead couples to pursue exciting experiences in their relationships. In this study, we proposed a motivational model of self-expansion in which daily approach relationship goals are associated with higher daily relational self-expansion, through a greater likelihood of engaging in exciting activities with a partner. In a 21-day daily diary study, we found that on days when people (or their partners) reported higher relationship approach goals than they typically did, they reported greater relational self-expansion, and that this was due in part to a greater likelihood of engaging in exciting couple activities. In turn, higher daily relational self-expansion was associated with higher daily relationship satisfaction.

What sparks relational self-expansion?

One of the contributions of this research is shifting the focus from the outcomes of self-expansion to the factors that underlie self-expansion. The self-expansion model has been largely silent about the factors that prompt people to engage in self-expanding activities (with exception, Mattingly et al., 2012). In this study, we adopted a daily motivational

perspective, and examined whether daily fluctuations in approach relationship goals were associated with an increased occurrence of exciting couple activities. Our central idea was that people motivated by approach relationship goals have an advantage in experiencing boosts of relational self-expansion because they are more motivated to maintain their relationship by engaging in exciting, adventurous, and novel activities. This extends existing research that has found that people with a chronic focus on growth, development, and positivity report greater relational self-expansion (Mattingly et al., 2012), by elucidating how this process might unfold within the context of daily relationship experiences. That is, the motivation to move toward positive outcomes is associated with wanting to engage in exciting, novel activities with a partner that, in turn, promote greater relational self-expansion and relationship satisfaction.

Another factor that sparks relational self-expansion is a *partner's* daily approach relationship goals. Our work extends existing research with our finding that on days when *partners* have higher daily approach relationship goals, people also experience greater relational self-expansion and satisfaction. These findings add to self-expansion theory by elucidating the interdependent nature of relationship growth, particularly in terms of what instigates self-expansion. More specifically, our study contributes to self-expansion theory with evidence of how self-expansion might emerge in relationships based on the influence of both couple members.

Implications of the motivational model of self-expansion

Our work advances our understanding of how couples might promote self-expansion in their relationship. According to self-expansion theory, people have a desire to expand the self and have broadened perspectives; however, there is evidence to suggest that some people have this desire more than others (Gordon & Luo, 2011) or possess individual differences in motivation to pursue related self-expansion activities (Mattingly et al., 2012). For instance, Mattingly et al. (2012) found that people who have higher approach relationship goals report more relational self-expansion (i.e., view partner as a source of new perspectives and experiences). Our work extends previous research by demonstrating that daily changes in people's approach relationship goals are associated with a greater occurrence of exciting shared activities and, in turn, relational self-expansion. In other words, our work suggests that people's approach goals can be enhanced, which is one route to boosting relational self-expansion (i.e., examining potential antecedents).

The results of this study are in line with a broaden and build theory of emotion that suggest goals oriented toward approaching positivity beget more positive emotions and actions (Fredrickson, 2001, 2013). This fits with theorizing that it is best to be proactive in maintaining growth rather than waiting until boredom sets in (i.e., while the going is good, continue to build; Aron & Aron, 1986). For instance, Harasymchuk et al. (2017) examined boredom as a prompt to engage in self-expanding-related exciting activities versus familiar and routine ones. Although people consistently thought that they should engage in self-expanding types of shared activities with their partners when bored,

people did not have as consistently strong behavioral intentions to behave in that way. The current findings suggest that higher daily approach relational goals (own or a partner's) may help people capitalize on experiences that promote growth and provide excitement.

Limitations and future research

There are several strengths of this study including the focus on both members of a couple in their daily lives and over time; however, there are several limitations of this research that future research should address. First, while our conceptual model is informed by theory, we cannot confirm the causal directions of the effects. In future research, relationship goals could be manipulated to examine the impact on the types of activities in which people engage (i.e., exciting) and people's subsequent perceptions of relational self-expansion. Relatedly, although we conducted a longitudinal study, we did not account for time in our model (see Maxwell & Cole, 2007 for a review of this critique). With the current design (i.e., assessing daily responses at the end of each day), we did not expect to find lagged effects. However, in a future design, if we assessed people's daily responses closer to the time the exciting activity occurs (i.e., just before and just after), we would be able to better take time into account in our daily motivational model.

Second, we focused on within-person variation in relationship goals, but we did not examine what prompts people to have higher daily approach relationship goals. Gable and Impett (2012) concluded that while researchers know about what dispositional factors shape motives (e.g., attachment style), very little is known about situational influences. A greater understanding of what contributes to people's approach relationship goals could be a useful tool for clinicians to provide advice for boosting those motivations (Gable & Impett, 2012). Third, further research is needed to examine the link between exciting couple activities and perceptions of growth (i.e., relational self-expansion). It was previously assumed, in past research designs, that if people engage in exciting activities with a partner and experience increased relationship satisfaction, that this was because of self-expansion. However, no studies to our knowledge have measured changes in self-expansion. Experimental research testing the link between exciting couple activities and perceptions of self-expansion in the relationship would be beneficial in outlining how growth unfolds in relationships. Fourth, although we were able to rule out that our associations are not due solely to daily positive affect and time spent with partner, it is possible that other factors (e.g., mutual liking of the activity choice and enjoyment during the activity) might contribute to these associations. Fifth, the size of the coefficients in our study was small which is common in daily diary studies. Nevertheless, these small effects have been shown to accumulate and have significant consequences over time (Impett et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2017). Finally, we acknowledge that shared exciting activities are one possible way to increase relational self-expansion. Scholars also note that relational self-expansion can be increased by one partner changing (e.g., engaging in individual pursuits and personal development) to keep the other partner interested (i.e., see them in new light; Aron & Aron, 1986).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that self-expansion in a relationship is not necessarily the result of one major, substantial experience. Instead, relational self-expansion may be shaped by a variety of smaller daily factors. In our study, we found that daily goals, particularly goals oriented toward achieving positive relationship outcomes, were associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in exciting activities occurring with a partner, which in turn was associated with higher daily relational self-expansion. Additionally, our findings suggest that self-expansion is not just prompted by one person but is instead an interdependent process. Higher daily relational self-expansion was shaped not only by a person's daily approach relationship goals but also by the partner's daily approach relationship goals. Taken together, the results of this study suggest that, over a longer period of time, relational self-expansion, and ultimately relationship satisfaction, is based on the little things each couple member is motivated to do on a daily basis in their relationship.

ORCID iD

Cheryl Harasymchuk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9872-0035
Emily A. Impett https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3348-7524

Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data and materials used in this research can be obtained by emailing: Cheryl.Harasymchuk@carleton.ca.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Additional measures were assessed that do not apply to this project. They are reported in Muise et al. (2019) and Impett et al. (2019). Although we used the same data set and reported on two similar variables (i.e., daily relational self-expansion and relationship satisfaction), Muise et al. (2019) focused on the outcomes of relational self-expansion, whereas the current article is focused on the predictors of self-expansion (although both papers do report on the association between self-expansion and relationship quality).
2. R_C refers to the reliability of change (within-person) and is a way to assess reliability of daily measures in daily diary studies (Cranford et al., 2006).
3. Although our key focus and contribution was on the daily associations (i.e., within-person differences), we also explored the role of between-person differences in two ways: (1) as an aggregate of daily measures of approach relationship goals and (2) with a background version of approach relationship goals. Across both methods of assessing between-person differences in

relationship goals, the between-person effects largely mirror the within-person findings (see Online Supplemental Material).

4. Although we assessed who initiated the activity, we did not have a sufficient number of instances in which a person said that "I initiated it" to examine whether people high in approach relationship goals initiate more exciting activities with their partners.

5. We also conducted analyses without avoidance goals and found the same results. We controlled for avoidance goals to show that it is not just any relationship goal that is associated with a greater occurrence of exciting activities, but that the effect is specific to approach motivation. We presented the results with avoidance goals controlled to provide a more conservative test, and also to be consistent with previous research on approach and avoidance relationship goals that typically includes both as simultaneous predictors of outcomes (e.g., Impett et al., 2010).

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