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A Longitudinal Investigation of Relational Catalyst Support of Goal Strivings

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Abstract

The goal of this work was to test a theoretical model of relational catalyst support provision that promotes thriving in non-adverse times. We tested a pathway proposed by Feeney and Collins (2014) that explains how relational catalyst support in the context of close relationships might lead to thriving. We proposed that once relational catalyst support has been received, it functions through the mechanisms of being perceived to be responsive to one's needs and promoting perceived capability. Perceived capability should promote indices of thriving including self-esteem, goal accomplishment, growth, and specific and general availability of support. This model was supported in two studies of married couples using observational and longitudinal methods surrounding the support of goal-strivings. Results indicate that (a) partner support of goal-strivings predicted important indicators of thriving over time, and (b) both received and perceived relational catalyst support work together and play important roles in predicting these outcomes.

Keywords

relational catalyst support; perceived partner responsiveness; thriving; goals; self-growth; relationships

Having a relationship partner who encourages one to achieve one's personal goals can be one of the most important life experiences. Being and feeling supported by a responsive partner may help one to overcome obstacles, make a plan of action, and ultimately achieve one's goals. There is much to be gained in the process of goal pursuit, and people are likely to experience self-growth and benefits to self-esteem as they work toward important life goals. Though there is an extensive literature on support provision in stressful life contexts, researchers have only begun to emphasize the importance of support provision in other, non-adverse life contexts. This is an area of research that is in need of theoretical development given the potential benefits of receiving support in other life contexts as well – particularly in the context of goal-strivings. Another aspect of the social support literature that is in need of greater attention involves the inter-workings of key social support constructs referred to

as perceived support (general perceptions of available support), perceived partner responsiveness (perceptions of specific enacted support behaviors), and received support (actual enacted support behaviors) in predicting important social support outcomes. These constructs have not typically been investigated in the same study, nor have models been proposed regarding how they might work together in the context of particular social support interactions. Thus, the current research emphasizes the importance of partner support for goal-strivings and growth (in non-adverse life contexts) in predicting long-term personal outcomes. In addition, it seeks to understand how three constructs that have been widely discussed in the social support and/or close relationships literatures – received support behaviors during specific interactions, perceived partner responsiveness, and general perceptions of available support (typically referred to as perceived support) – work together to promote personal well-being. We approach this question using a theoretical model and a methodologically strong combination of observational and longitudinal methods with two large samples of married couples.

The Importance of Responsive Support in Positive Contexts

There has been relatively little work on support processes in positive contexts compared to the massive literature on social support in negative contexts. One important positive context in which support processes have been considered recently involves support for personal goal strivings (and other forms of autonomous exploration behavior). Recent studies using observational methods have provided evidence for the importance of support in the context of personal goal strivings (e.g. Feeney, 2004; Girme et al., 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Meltzer, McNulty, & Karney, 2012; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). For example, one observational study showed strong positive effects on the recipient's immediate happiness, self-esteem, and perceived likelihood of achieving a goal when close relationship partners facilitated personal goal strivings (Feeney, 2004). Another study demonstrated that people who received encouraging support from their partners were more enthusiastic during an exploration activity, reported enjoying the activity more, and experienced increased self-esteem following the activity (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Both of these studies, however, focused on immediate outcomes of support provision and did not assess long-term implications of the support behavior. One study that did examine longer-term consequences of support provision that was observed during couples' discussions of self-improvement desires showed that nurturant and action facilitating support during these discussions predicted greater self-improvement and increased relationship quality over the course of a year (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). Related research using self-report methods has revealed associations between partner goal support and relationship satisfaction (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996), and has found recipient reports of perceived available support for promotion-focused goals to be associated (cross-sectionally) with relationship and personal well-being (Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009).

As evident from this review, only a handful of studies thus far have examined effects of partner support for goal strivings using either observational and/or longitudinal assessments. However, the work that has been conducted thus far indicates that this is an important area for researchers to direct empirical attention given likely implications for both personal and

relational functioning (e.g. Feeney, 2004, 2007; Overall et al., 2010). The importance of considering interpersonal social support processes in positive life contexts is also underscored by research in the close relationships literature (albeit not focused on social support) showing positive effects on the individual and the relationship when relationship partners share in one's celebration of life successes and achievements (e.g., Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, 2004), and promote one's movement towards one's ideal self (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999). One major goal of this investigation is to contribute to the relatively sparse literature on social support in positive (non-adverse) life contexts by using rigorous methods involving both observational assessments of received social support behaviors and longitudinal assessments of long-term consequences of those support behaviors within the same study.

Theory of Thriving Through Relationships

Feeney and Collins (2014) recently proposed an integrative theory of social support, which includes two key support functions that enable people to thrive through relationships. Source of Strength (SOS) support focuses on how thriving can occur through partner support that facilitates optimal coping in times of adversity. The notion of SOS support expands the attachment function of a safe haven to suggest that support providers not only provide comfort in times of stress, but facilitate benefit finding and growth that may help one emerge from a difficult situation feeling even stronger than before (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2014). Relational Catalyst (RC) support emphasizes thriving through participation in life opportunities for growth or accomplishment in the absence of adversity (Feeney & Collins, 2014). The notion of RC support expands the attachment function of a secure base (which suggests a more passive partner function of waiting to provide support if needed) to suggest that relationship partners may serve as active catalysts or launch pads for helping one to thrive through embracing life opportunities (e.g., involving work, play, socializing, pursuing goals, exploration, etc.) (Feeney & Collins, 2014). As a result, an individual may grow and explore in ways that they might not have imagined independently.

In this study, we focus on and examine the interpersonal processes involved in the provision of RC support to understand how RC support promotes important personal outcomes. Feeney and Collins (2014) propose a pathway of interpersonal processes that explains how RC support in the context of close relationships might lead to thriving. First, a life opportunity must present itself and an individual must either express interest in the opportunity to motivate RC support provision or the support provider may provide RC support without explicit support seeking.

After RC support has been received, the next crucial step in the model is that the support recipient must interpret the support provision as responsive. The support-recipient's subjective perception of a specific support interaction (which we refer to as perceived partner responsiveness, defined as the perception that a partner has provided the type and amount of support desired in a specific situation and has delivered the support sensitively; Feeney & Collins, 2014) should be an important intermediary between the actual, received support behavior and the recipient's outcomes. This is because only support behaviors that are sensitive and responsive to need should be perceived as supportive by the recipient

(Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Maisel & Gable, 2009). For example, both controlling and intrusive forms of support would count as support provision on most self-report measures of received support that do not consider the nature and quality of support provided, as would support behaviors that are delivered in a negative, impatient, or frustrated manner. In order to determine support effectiveness, it is important to consider the extent to which the received behaviors were responsive to the recipient's needs at the time (Feeney & Collins, 2014; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

Recipients of sensitive and responsive support should experience perceived partner responsiveness, which is expected to predict immediate outcomes for the self and relationship. Immediate outcomes of receiving responsive support for thriving are expected to mediate the relationship between perceived partner responsiveness and long-term thriving (Feeney & Collins, 2014). One immediate outcome of experiencing responsive support for thriving should include positive self-evaluations/self-perceptions (Feeney & Collins, 2014). In the present study, we focus on one important self-evaluation – perceived capability – that should be a particularly important immediate outcome of receiving responsive support for the embracing of life opportunities (e.g., goal pursuit). Perceived capability should, in turn, predict important long-term outcomes of RC support that are indicative of thriving, such as goal accomplishment or progress, self-growth, and high self-esteem. In the present study, we focus on these three goal-relevant outcomes as indicators of long-term thriving.

Considerations for Model Development

Before testing a model of how RC support predicts long-term thriving outcomes, we highlight three important considerations in doing so. First, we emphasize that the link between RC support and outcomes cannot be adequately assessed without careful attention to the relational dynamics surrounding specific instances of received support. This means that actual support behaviors must be observed as they occur in specific social support interactions, and these observations must consider the recipient's desire and need for support as well as the degree to which the partner's provision of support was responsive and sensitively delivered (the quality of support provided). Also, because “invisible support” (support that is given by a support-provider but not necessarily noticed by the support-recipient) has been shown to be especially helpful in some circumstances (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Girme, Overall, & Simpson, 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2010), support-recipients may not intuitively link specific behaviors to their general perceptions of feeling supported.

Second, we highlight the importance of considering support dynamics in one's closest relationships, as opposed to support from non-close others. It is in one's closest relationships where there is the biggest expectation for responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004). In fact, we suspect that people weigh their closest relationships quite heavily when reporting their general perceptions of available support (Feeney & Collins, 2014), which have been strongly linked to health outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Also, the lack of focus on close others may explain why social support interventions involving strangers as support-providers have been inconclusive (see Helgeson, Cohen, Schulz, & Yasko, 2000).

Third, it is important for researchers to work toward developing and testing models of social support processes that integrate both perceptual and behavioral components. These components include (a) received/observed support behaviors that occur during a specific support interaction, (b) immediate perceptions of specific support behaviors that are received during a specific support interaction (which we refer to as perceived partner responsiveness), (c) relationship-specific perceptions of available support (from a specific relationship partner), and (d) general perceptions of available support (from one's entire social support network). Testing a model that incorporates all of these perceptual and behavioral components requires consideration of how specific support experiences contribute, over time, to general perceptions of available support.

Proposed Model that Integrates Behavioral and Perceptual Components of the Relational Catalyst Support Process

We seek to test a proposed pathway (Feeney & Collins, 2014) by which relational catalyst support predicts long-term outcomes indicative of thriving (goal accomplishment, self-growth, self-esteem), in a model that integrates both behavioral and perceptual components of this social support process. First, observed ratings of received, responsive RC support for goal-strivings (during a concrete support interaction) should predict the support-recipient's specific perceptions of the partner's responsiveness during that interaction (perceived partner responsiveness, see Figure 1 path a). Perceived partner responsiveness is a crucial mediating variable because support that does not match one's needs and that is not delivered sensitively would not be considered helpful (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Feeney & Collins, 2014; Overall et al., 2010). Next, the recipient's perceived partner responsiveness should predict the recipient's immediate perceptions of capability with regard to accomplishing the goal (an important immediate outcome of the interaction, path b). In addition to testing an important mechanism identified in the theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2014), this prediction is also consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that humans have basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Feelings of capability are closely tied to competence, which is an important component of intrinsic motivation and goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Feelings of perceived capability should be crucial to successful goal pursuit because they motivate people to make plans and take action with regard to goal accomplishment (Gollwitzer, 1999). Finally, feelings of immediate capability should in turn predict important long-term outcomes indicative of thriving including self-growth, goal accomplishment, and self-esteem (path c). Given our emphasis on capability as a mechanism linking RC support to long-term outcomes, we specifically focus on long-term outcomes that are relevant to goal pursuit and have implications for personal thriving.

We also propose a pathway by which general perceptions of available support (another indicator of individual thriving) may be formed through dyadic interactions involving RC support: We expect that recipients' perceived partner responsiveness, which is based in support behavior that was actually received during a support interaction (and is likely to be representative of typical support interactions within the relationship) will shape, over time, relationship-specific expectations of available support from that particular relationship

partner (path d), which in turn contributes to more general perceptions of available support (typically referred to as perceived support in the social support literature, path e). Thus, we propose and test the idea that general perceptions of available support are based in actual support experiences within one's closest relationships. Actual instances of received support that are responsive to one's needs (and perceived to be responsive to one's needs) should form the building blocks of one's general perceptions of available support.

This model was tested in two studies using large samples of established married (Study 1) and newlywed (Study 2) couples. In both studies, the proposed support processes were tested using observational methods during discussions of personal goal-strivings and longitudinal methods that enable the assessment of important outcome variables over time.

Study 1

Method

Participants—Participants were 203 married couples recruited using flyers and advertisements in local newspapers. Of those who reported their ethnicity, the sample was predominantly white (75.90%) with 1.85% American Indian, 1.35% Asian, 17.45% Black, 2.1% Hispanic, and 1.3% Other. The sample included a range of education levels: 5.25% did not complete high school, 17.3% completed high school, 22.85% completed some college credits, 13.65% completed an associate's degree, 20.45% completed a bachelor's degree, 10.75% completed some grad school, and 12.05% completed a graduate or professional degree. Mean age was 39.08 and ranged from 21 to 83 ($SD=12.83$). Couples had been married an average of 12.52 years at Time 1 and 69% had children. At Time 2, 67 couples did not complete the follow-up, but independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences between these couples and those who continued in the study on any of the Time 1 measures. Couples were paid \$50 for each laboratory session, and \$20 for the follow-up mail survey, for a total of \$120 per couple.

Procedure—At Time 1, each couple participated in two sessions in the laboratory (as part of a larger investigation) during which one couple member was randomly assigned to be the "support-recipient" and discuss their most important goal, while the other couple member was implicitly assumed to be the "support-provider." During the questionnaire session, the support-recipient listed up to 10 personal goals that he/she would like to accomplish over the next 6 months. During the activity session (one week later), the support-recipient was given a card with the goal that he/she had identified that he/she would most like to accomplish and asked to discuss the goal with his/her spouse. Couple members were unobtrusively videotaped, and independent observers (blind to study hypotheses) later rated the extent to which the support-provider enacted responsive relational catalyst support behaviors during the discussion.

For each interaction, at least two independent coders rated the extent to which the support-provider exhibited proximity-seeking behavior ($ICC = .87$), support for the partner's goals ($ICC = .72$), responsive emotional support ($ICC = .74$), responsive instrumental support ($ICC = .55$), encouragement of the goals ($ICC = .65$), warmth and positive affect ($ICC = .75$), was listening and attentive ($ICC = .54$) and exhibited confidence in the partner's ability

(ICC = .74). Coders also made a summary rating of the extent to which the support-provider demonstrated sensitive and responsive RC support during the discussion (ICC = .80). For each category of behavior, coders made ratings on a 5-point scale that took into account both frequency and quality of each behavior, and the independent ratings of coders were averaged into composite scales. The nine support scales were then averaged into a composite index representing observers' ratings of *received RC support* during the discussion that was responsive to the recipients' needs ($\alpha = .89$). Couples discussed goals pertaining to career (30.9 %), education (10.05 %), travel (1.25 %), physical fitness (11.6 %), relationships (9.4 %), creativity (5.65 %), possessions (2.8 %), spirituality (4.7 %), personal development (7.25 %), finances (7.25 %), and other (11.4 %).

Immediately following the goal discussion, recipients reported their perceptions of the behaviors that the support-provider enacted during the discussion. An index of *perceived partner responsiveness* was computed by averaging the recipient's ratings of nine items (on 5-point Likert scales) indicating the extent to which the support-provider was affectionate, supportive, comforting, helpful, encouraging, kind, interested, confident, and sensitive ($\alpha = .94$). The support-recipient's *perceived capability* with regard to accomplishing his/her goals was also assessed immediately following the discussion on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all capable, 5 = extremely capable): "How capable do you feel you are of accomplishing the goal."

At Time 2, approximately six months later, couples returned to the laboratory and completed questionnaires assessing the long-term thriving outcomes of interest. *Self-growth* was assessed with two items rated on a 5-point scale (1 [not at all], 5 [very much]): "Over the past 6 months, to what degree do you feel that you have learned new things and developed new competencies?" and "Over the past 6 months, to what degree do you feel that you have grown as a person (for example, you may feel that you have grown socially, grown intellectually, grown in the sense of handling more responsibilities, or grown in some other important way)?" ($\alpha = .79$). *Goal accomplishment* was assessed by asking recipients to report whether they had accomplished the goal that they had indicated as being the most important to accomplish six months earlier. The support-recipient was asked, "Have you accomplished this goal?" and responded yes or no. *Self-esteem* was assessed with the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale ($\alpha = .90$).

At Time 2, recipients also provided reports of their relationship-specific perceptions of their spouse's support (the typical level of support that they perceive to be available from their spouse), as well as their general perceptions of available support (from their broader support network). Given that the support context focused on goal-strivings, *relationship-specific perceptions of support* from the spouse were assessed using a 12-item version of the Secure Base Support Scale (Feeney & Thrush, 2010, $\alpha = .95$). Items assessed the extent to which one generally perceives that one's spouse is available and encouraging when one takes on a new goal or challenging task (e.g., "When I tell my spouse about something new that I would like to try, he/she usually encourages me to do it"). *General perceptions of available support* were assessed using a 5-item version of the Social Support Questionnaire, which is a widely used measure of perceived available support (SSQ; Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987). For each of five support domains (e.g., Who can you really count on to be

dependable when you need help?), recipients listed the initials of any people who would be available if support was needed, and then rated their satisfaction with the support that is available to them on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied). Responses to the satisfaction items were averaged to form a composite index of general perceptions of available support ($\alpha = .95$).

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Correlations ranged from .00 to .51, indicating that the variables represent distinct constructs and do not overlap conceptually. We used the AMOS Structural Equation Modeling program to test the fit of the hypothesized model. Standardized path coefficients are displayed in Figure 2, demonstrating a pattern consistent with predictions. The model was a good fit to the data (comparative fit index [CFI] = .97, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .04, $\chi^2(11, N = 203) = 14.37, p = .213$). Consistent with predictions, results indicated that observer ratings of received RC support provided during the discussion predicted the recipient's perception of having been supported during the discussion (perceived partner responsiveness), which predicted the recipient's immediate feelings of capability after the discussion, which in turn predicted long-term thriving outcomes including growth and self-esteem at Time 2. Contrary to predictions, feelings of capability after the discussion did not predict goal accomplishment at Time 2. It is possible that, although participants were asked to discuss goals that they could accomplish in 6 months, this was not a long enough time period to fully complete a goal for all participants. We test goal accomplishment as an outcome with a longer follow-up in Study 2.

Also consistent with hypotheses, results indicated that received RC support behaviors, and recipients' perceptions of the responsiveness of those specific behaviors (perceived partner responsiveness), form the building blocks of future general perceptions of support from the specific relationship partner (the spouse) and from the recipients' social network more broadly (which are additional indices of thriving over time). These results indicated that the recipient's perceptions of having been supported during the goal discussion (perceived partner responsiveness) at Time 1 predicted the recipient's relationship-specific perceptions of support from his/her spouse six months later, which in turn predicted the recipient's general perceptions of available support.

Though we did not anticipate gender differences in our model, we also tested the model separately for male support recipients and female support recipients using a multiple groups model. We then conducted chi square difference tests by placing equality constraints on identical paths across models, one path at a time for sensitivity. This analysis indicated that there were no paths that were significantly different for men and women ($p < .05$).

Study 2

The goals of Study 2 were to replicate Study 1 with a larger sample, provide convergent support for the hypothesized model, and add methodological strengths. We built on Study 1 by using an expanded measure of perceived capability, having a one-year follow-up that

allows more time for goal accomplishment, and having both spouses discuss their goals for the next year.

Method

Participants—Participants were 229 heterosexual newlywed couples recruited through flyers, advertisements in local newspapers, and bridal shows as part of a larger investigation of newlywed relationships. The sample was predominantly white (81.86%) and the remainder of the sample reported as follows: 1.33% American Indian, 5.09% Asian, 6.86% Black, 3.32% Hispanic, .22% Pacific Islander, and 1.32% Other. The sample included a range of education levels: 1.35% did not complete high school, 8.61% completed high school, 18.10% completed some college credits, 6.84% completed an associate's degree, 33.11% completed a bachelor's degree, 15.67% completed some graduate school, and 16.34% completed a graduate or professional degree and had a mean income of \$60,000-\$80,000 per household. Mean age for husbands was 27.39 and for wives was 26.69, couples had been married an average of 4.60 months at Time 1, and most did not yet have children (6 couples had children).

At Time 2, 47 couples did not complete the follow-up. *T*-tests to check for differences on major study variables assessed at Time 1 revealed a significant difference in observer ratings of received relational catalyst support, indicating that both husbands and wives who completed the follow-up provided more RC support at Time 1 compared to those who did not complete the follow-up (For husbands $M_s = 3.22$ and 2.93 ; $t(191) = 2.60$, $p < .05$; for wives $M_s = 3.16$ and 2.90 ; $t(187) = 2.08$, $p < .05$). In addition, wives who completed both time points perceived greater partner responsiveness at Time 1 compared to those who did not complete Time 2 ($M_s = 3.76$ and 3.45 ; $t(188) = 2.14$, $p < .05$). There were no significant differences on any of the other Time 1 variables. Participants were paid \$50 per couple for each laboratory session, and \$50 per couple for the follow up session.

Procedure—Couples underwent identical procedures to Study 1 except that both couple members were given the opportunity to discuss their most important personal goal for the following year. Each discussion was 8 minutes, and the order of the discussions was randomly determined. The follow-up was completed in the laboratory one year after the initial session.

Two independent coders later rated the extent to which the support-provider exhibited proximity-seeking behavior (ICC's = .93 for husband support-providers, .91 for wife support-providers), support for the partner's goal (ICC's = .84 for husband support-providers, .86 for wife support-providers), responsive emotional support (ICC's = .87 for husband support-providers, .87 for wife support-providers), responsive instrumental support (ICC's = .90 for husband support-providers, .90 for wife support-providers), encouragement of the goal (ICC's = .86 for husband support-providers, .90 for wife support-providers), warmth and positive affect (ICC's = .81 for husband support-providers, .80 for wife support-providers), listening and attentiveness (ICC's = .70, for husband support-providers, .79 for wife support-providers), confidence in the partner's ability (ICC's = .82 for husband support-providers, .85 for wife support-providers), and sensitive/responsive caregiving

(which was a summary rating of the extent to which the support-provider demonstrated sensitive and responsive RC support during the discussion, ICC's = .84 for husband support-providers, .85 for wife support-providers). A composite index representing observers' ratings of *received RC support* during the discussion (that was responsive to the recipients' needs) was computed by averaging the ratings for each behavior ($\alpha = .87$ for husband support-providers, $\alpha = .85$ for wife support-providers). Couples discussed goals pertaining to career (36.5% for husband's goals, 32.65% for wife's goals), education (24.4% for husband's goals, 25.9% for wife's goals), travel (.5% for husband's goals, 2.6% for wife's goals), physical fitness (7.3% for husband's goals, 11.4% for wife's goals), relationships (2.6% for husband's goals, 5.7% for wife's goals), creativity (4.15% for husband's goals, 5.45% for wife's goals), possessions (2.6% for husband's goals, 1.0% for wife's goals), spirituality (1.85% for husband's goals, 2.6% for wife's goals), personal development (8.55% for husband's goals, 7.55% for wife's goals), finances (4.4% for husband's goals, 2.6% for wife's goals), and other (7.3% for husband's goals, 2.6% for wife's goals).

Immediately following each discussion, support-recipients rated their perceptions of the behaviors that the spouse enacted during the discussion. Support-recipients rated (on 5-point Likert scales) the extent to which the support-provider was affectionate, helpful/supportive, comforting/reassuring, giving of assistance, encouraging, positive, listening/attentive, confident, and sensitive. A composite index of *perceived partner responsiveness* ($\alpha = .89$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .91$ for wife support-recipients) was computed by averaging items. Immediately after the discussion, the support-recipients also completed an expanded (from Study 1) measure of their *perceived capability* with regard to accomplishing their goals ($\alpha = .82$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .76$ for wife support-recipients). Recipients rated (on 5-point Likert scales) the extent to which they felt capable of accomplishing the goal, it was important to accomplish the goal, the goal was worthwhile, the goal was realistic, they planned to work toward the goal, and they felt confident after discussing the goal.

In this study, the Time 2 follow-up occurred after one year (instead of six months). At this time, both couple members completed the identical Study 1 measures of *self-growth* ($\alpha = .77$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .80$ for wife support-recipients), *goal accomplishment*, *self-esteem* ($\alpha = .90$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .93$ for wife support-recipients), *relationship-specific perceptions of support* from the spouse ($\alpha = .90$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .86$ for wife support-recipients), and *general perceptions of available support* ($\alpha = .89$ for husband support-recipients, $\alpha = .86$ for wife support-recipients).

Results

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Correlations ranged from $-.03$ to $.55$, indicating that the variables represent distinct constructs and do not overlap conceptually. We used the AMOS Structural Equation Modeling program to test the fit of the hypothesized model. The analysis used dyad as the unit of analysis and maximum likelihood method of estimation on the variance-covariance matrix. Because the husband and wife analyses included identical variables, we pooled the paths across men and women by placing equality constraints on the identical paths within the husband and wife models.

Before constraining each path, we performed a chi square difference test, and in no case did constraining a regression weight increase the chi square significantly ($p < .05$). Standardized path coefficients are displayed in Figure 3, demonstrating a pattern consistent with predictions and Study 1. The model was a good fit to the data (comparative fit index [CFI] = .99, root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .01, $\chi^2(87, N = 229) = 90.88$, $p = .37$). Results again supported predictions by indicating that observed received RC support predicted the recipient's perceived partner responsiveness, which in turn predicted the recipient's post-discussion capability, which predicted all three long-term outcomes (growth, goal accomplishment, and self-esteem) assessed at Year 2 (see Figure 3). Also consistent with hypotheses (and with Study 1), results indicated that the support-recipient's perceived partner responsiveness immediately after the discussion predicted the recipients' relationship-specific perceptions of the spouse's supportiveness at Year 2, which in turn predicted the recipient's general perceptions of available support.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to test a theoretical model of social support processes in non-aversive contexts and to examine long-term benefits (indicative of thriving) of relational catalyst (RC) support for goal-strivings. Within this context, we considered the effects of received RC partner support on immediate feelings of capability regarding the accomplishment of a goal – an important proposed mechanism linking RC support to thriving outcomes. We considered effects of the RC support process on long-term outcomes indicative of thriving including self-growth, goal accomplishment, and self-esteem. In addition, the proposed model elucidated ways in which received RC support and perceived partner responsiveness might form the building blocks of more general perceptions of relationship-specific support and general perceptions of available support (which are also indicators of thriving individuals). We next highlight and discuss results for each part of the model.

The Importance of Relational Catalyst Support in Promoting Personal Thriving through Perceptions of Capability

The results of two studies support the theory of thriving through relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2014) by providing converging evidence for an interpersonal process model of relational catalyst support. Results indicated that received (responsive) RC support for goal-strivings that was observed during a concrete support interaction and perceived by the recipient as supportive predicted the recipient's immediate feelings of capability (an important proposed mechanism), which in turn predicted long-term outcomes indicative of personal thriving including self-growth, goal accomplishment, and self-esteem. Across two studies, all paths in the proposed model were statistically significant, except for feelings of capability predicting goal accomplishment 6 months later in Study 1. Because this link was observed in Study 2, which used a longer (one year) follow-up period, we suspect that 6 months was too short a time period for many participants to accomplish their stated goals. It is also possible that this difference between studies could be due to the larger age and relationship length range in Study 1 or differences in the types of goals that each sample was

pursuing. Future research should explore the influence of relationship stage and goal content on the effectiveness of relational catalyst support.

This work is consistent with a recent emphasis on the importance of understanding support processes in the context of goal strivings and opportunities for self-growth (e.g. Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2014; Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009; Overall et al., 2010), and it adds to the growing literature emphasizing the importance of support in non-adverse (or positive) life contexts. The model that we tested and validated in two studies using both observational and longitudinal methods includes indices of both received and perceived support, as well as several outcome measures of positive functioning (thriving) that have not been previously tested within the same model.

This work establishes one important way in which people can thrive through the support that they receive in their close relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2014). The results indicate that couple members experienced increased feelings of capability immediately upon receiving RC support, and as a result they experienced personal thriving benefits up to one year after receiving this responsive support from their spouse. Our long-term thriving measures indicated that recipients of responsive support in this life context experienced increased self-esteem, self-growth and goal accomplishment— all of which reflect a healthy self-concept and a strong trajectory for self-development in adulthood. These results highlight the relational nature of the self (Leary, 2005) and suggest a pathway through which individuals may become intrinsically motivated to work toward and become their “ideal selves” (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999).

The Importance of Responsive RC Support Behaviors in Forming the Building Blocks of General Perceptions of Support

Both studies also provided converging support for the proposed pathways through which general perceptions of available support (another indicator of thriving) are likely to be formed. Results of both studies showed that general perceptions of available support (which have been linked to important health outcomes; see Uchino, 2009 for a review) are likely to be based in actual support interactions with close others: Both studies showed that specific perceptions of support received during the goal discussions (perceived partner responsiveness) translated into increased perceptions of relationship-specific support over time, which were linked with general perceptions of available support. Thus, results support the idea that specific dyadic-level interactions with close relationship partners form the building blocks of generalized perceptions of available support through interaction-specific and relationship-specific levels of perception.

The links between observer ratings of received support and recipients’ perceptions of support received (perceived partner responsiveness) suggest that what a support-provider actually does during an interaction is important, and that support-recipients are attending to the quality of support provided. These results are consistent with other lab studies that have shown links between observed/received support, immediate perceptions of that support behavior, and outcomes (e.g. Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2004; Feeney, 2004; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Although this makes intuitive sense, it is important to establish given that the importance of received support is sometimes minimized given inconsistent

findings using retroactive self-reports of received support (instead of actual observations that account for the quality of support enacted). This work further emphasizes the importance of assessing the nature and quality of support provided, and the extent to which support is responsive to and matches the needs of the support recipient (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

This investigation also speaks to the importance of considering effects of social support within one's closest relationships because outcomes should be much more strongly affected by support processes that occur within one's closest relationships than by those that occur with strangers or non-close others. We suspect that support interactions with non-close others would not have the same effect on generalized perceptions of support, or other long-term thriving outcomes. We do expect that the processes we tested within the context of marital relationships are likely to apply to other types of close relationships as well, including close friendships and parent-child relationships. However, it remains for future research to establish how support experiences (positive and negative) in various types of close relationships work together to influence important outcomes for the recipient.

Conclusion

This investigation has several strengths and implications for understanding social support processes. First, it considers support processes in a life context (pursuit of personal goals) that has received comparatively little attention in research on social support, which has focused primarily on support in times of stress. The results indicating that relational catalyst support for goal-strivings can lead to positive personal functioning corroborate the recent emphasis on considering social support and thriving in non-adverse life contexts (Feeney & Collins, 2014). Second, it considers both perceptual and behavioral aspects of the social support process, as well as multiple levels of perception, and how all of these elements work together to predict outcomes relevant to thriving. Third, it uses observational assessments that provide rich insight into the effects of received relational catalyst support, as well as longitudinal methods that revealed significant long-term benefits that could be predicted from short 8-10-minute support interactions. Fourth, it emphasizes the importance of considering support dynamics in one's closest relationships and how they are likely to form the building blocks of generalized perceptions of support. Research examining how generalized perceptions of support are formed is lacking, and this study takes an initial step toward addressing this gap in the literature. Fifth, it is noteworthy that all hypothesized pathways, except for one, emerged as statistically significant across both studies.

The results of this investigation point to a number of future research directions. First, though the use of two representative community samples suggests that the results will generalize to North American couples, much less is known about support processes in other cultures. It is possible that responsive support might look different in more communal cultures and that individual goal strivings might be less important than those that benefit the larger family unit. Second, it is important to acknowledge that the pathways established in this investigation are correlational; thus, future research is needed to test each pathway experimentally and establish causal effects. Third, it is important to note that the focus of the present study was on three individual thriving outcomes that are likely to result from

receiving responsive support for goal-strivings (i.e., growth, goal accomplishment, self-esteem); however, relational catalyst support is expected to result in a variety of other thriving outcomes, such as positive relationship functioning and stability (Feeney & Collins, 2014), which remain to be tested in future research. This is consistent with previous research that has shown positive effects of partner support for goals and growth opportunities on relationship satisfaction (e.g. Fivecoat, Tomlinson, Aron, & Caprariello, 2014; Overall et al., 2010). Fourth, although the focus of this paper was on the positive effects of receiving RC support on the recipient, it will be important for future research also to consider the beneficial effects of providing this type of support on the support-provider's goal pursuit and well-being. Support-providers as well as recipients are likely to benefit from a process of mutual responsiveness (see Feeney & Collins, 2014). Finally, it remains for future research to provide insight into the behaviors that support recipients enact and how these behaviors contribute to shaping the social support process. It is likely that support-seeking behaviors on the part of the support recipient influence both received support and perceptions of partner responsiveness (Feeney & Collins, 2014). The role of the support-recipient in eliciting desired levels of support is a topic that has been understudied in the social support literature and will require attention in future research. Relatedly, it will be important for future research to consider the extent to which individual difference characteristics of both the support-recipient and the support provider might moderate the links in the model.

Overall, this work contributes to several psychology literatures (i.e., on social support, positive psychology, close relationships) by demonstrating how the receipt of relational catalyst support in positive life contexts provides important benefits for the recipient, by providing a model of social support processes that integrates both behavioral and perceptual components of the process, and by employing both observational and longitudinal methods within the same studies to address these issues. We hope that this work will encourage researchers to continue to explore the relations between perceptual and behavioral components of the social support process – and within positive as well as negative support contexts.

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Figure 1.
Proposed theoretical model.

Figure 2.
Study 1 path analyses testing the theoretical model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 3.
Study 2 pooled path analyses testing the theoretical model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations for Study 1.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Received RC Support (Time 1 Observed)	3.15	.78	—						
2. Perceived Partner Responsiveness (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	3.83	.92	.37**	—					
3. Perceived Capability (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	4.49	.55	.18*	.23*	—				
4. Relationship-Specific Perceptions of Support (Time 2)	4.57	1.06	.06	.32**	.13	—			
5. General Perceptions of Available Support (Time 2)	5.09	1.26	.01	-.10	.09	.29**	—		
6. Self-Growth (Time 2)	3.63	.97	.02	.12	.21*	.19*	.16	—	
7. Goal Accomplishment (Time 2)	1.40	.49	.04	.00	.13	.06	-.00	.11	—
8. Self-Esteem (Time 2)	5.42	1.09	.12	.14	.16 [†]	.40**	.13	.47**	.09

[†]
 $p < .10$,*
 $p < .05$;**
 $p < .01$

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations for Study 2.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Wife as Support-Recipient									
1. Received RC Support (Time 1 Observed)	3.16	.66	—						
2. Perceived Partner Responsiveness (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	3.67	.83	.31**	—					
3. Perceived Capability (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	4.40	.54	.03	.36**	—				
4. Relationship-Specific Perceptions of Support (Time 2)	4.97	.70	.20*	.31**	.20*	—			
5. General Perceptions of Available Support (Time 2)	5.51	.70	.07	.16 [†]	.05	.36**	—		
6. Self-Growth (Time 2)	4.08	.75	-.01	.06	.20*	.36**	.21**	—	
7. Goal Accomplishment (Time 2)	1.48	.50	.08	.16 [†]	.27*	.08	-.02	.21**	—
8. Self-Esteem (Time 2)	5.51	1.09	.16 [†]	.20*	.21*	.47**	.35**	.51**	.03
Husband as Support-Recipient									
1. Received RC Support (Time 1 Observed)	3.10	.69	—						
2. Perceived Partner Responsiveness (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	3.76	.83	.18*	—					
3. Perceived Capability (Time 1 Post-Discussion)	4.47	.51	.14	.54**	—				
4. Relationship-Specific Perceptions of Support (Time 2)	4.65	.88	-.03	.31**	.32**	—			
5. General Perceptions of Available Support (Time 2)	5.42	.65	-.01	.16 [†]	.22**	.55**	—		
6. Self-Growth (Time 2)	4.00	.77	.07	.24**	.37**	.27**	.35**	—	
7. Goal Accomplishment (Time 2)	1.37	.49	.04	.03	.19*	.04	-.01	.18*	—
8. Self-Esteem (Time 2)	5.54	.98	-.02	.03	.27**	.37**	.40**	.36**	.14

[†]
 $p < .10$,*
 $p < .05$;**
 $p < .01$