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Helping Each Other Grow: Romantic Partner Support, Self-Improvement, and Relationship Quality

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Abstract

This research tested whether and how partners' support of self-improvement efforts influences recipients' relationship evaluations and self-improvement success. Study 1 provided an initial test of predictions using self-reports (N = 150). Study 2 assessed support behavior exhibited in couples' (N = 47) discussions of self-improvement desires, and tracked relationship quality and self-improvement every 3 months for 1 year. More nurturing and action-facilitating partner support was more helpful to recipients, whereas partners who criticized and invalidated recipients were less helpful. Receiving more help from the partner, in turn, predicted greater relationship quality and more self-improvement. More negative support seeking also predicted lower self-improvement because recipients' behavior elicited less partner help. These effects were not attributable to partners' general warmth and understanding, global self or relationship evaluations, how much recipients desired or tried to change, or whether targeted attributes posed relationship problems. This research documents the powerful influence that partners' help has on recipients' personal growth.

Keywords

partner support, self-improvement, personal goals, personal growth, instrumentality

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Self-improvement is an important motive. People who commit to and successfully pursue personal goals become happier, particularly if their efforts are supported by close others (Brunstein, 1993). The manner in which significant others, such as romantic partners, support self-improvement strivings might also contribute to self-improvement success. Encouragement and advice should facilitate self-improvement, whereas criticism and invalidation of goals will likely impede it. The extent to which partners are helpful should also shape recipients' feelings about their relationship. We tested these ideas by examining connections between partners' support behaviors, partners' helpfulness, and recipients' self-improvement success and relationship quality.

Partners' Help in Achieving Personal Goals

Brunstein, Dangelmayer, and Schultheiss (1996) found that people who reported greater goal support from their partners evaluated their relationships more positively. The support component most strongly related to relationship satisfaction, however, was how much partners directly contributed to or impeded goal accomplishment. Fitzsimmons and Shah (2008) also presented experimental evidence that others who are instrumental to goal success are evaluated more positively. In their studies, individuals reported greater closeness and displayed stronger approach tendencies toward people who were previously identified as helpful in achieving primed goals. Fitzsimmons and Shah also found that the more participants evaluated their friends according to their instrumentality for academic achievement, the harder participants studied and the higher their test scores were during the following month.

These studies suggest that the degree to which partners help individuals achieve their goals boosts relationship evaluations and self-improvement success. A partner's degree of instrumentality should be associated with the type of supportive behaviors he or she enacts. Indeed, recent meta-analytic summaries (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult,

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Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009) show that individuals report greater movement toward their ideal selves when they perceive that their partners treat them as if they already possess these desired attributes. Greater perceived partner affirmation is also associated with enhanced relationship satisfaction.

This type of partner behavior is most often examined by assessing general perceptions of partners' affirmation tendencies. In contrast, our aim was to investigate the support behaviors individuals enact to help their partners improve specific targeted attributes (e.g., lose weight or become more productive). In one of their studies, Rusbult et al. (2009) examined couples discussing personal goals. Intimates felt they moved closer to attaining their targeted goal if they perceived that their partners acted in a helpful way, and observer ratings revealed that more positive partner behaviors predicted greater motivation to attain the targeted goal. We extend this approach by examining the support-related behaviors partners enact when discussing self-improvement goals, and assessing the extent to which the partners' support produces greater self-improvement and relationship quality.

Partners' Support Behavior, Partners' Help, and Self-Improvement Success

Support-related behaviors are commonly assessed by coding how partners interact when discussing personal stressors. Table 1 lists behaviors displayed by support providers (i.e., when discussing their partners' issues) that represent the most common types of support coded and that we assessed to measure support of self-improvement goals. Positive behaviors can be classified into two broad categories (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). *Nurturant support* represents efforts to console, including expressing caring, love, and concern for the recipient (emotional support) and instilling confidence that he or she can achieve his or her goals (esteem support). *Action-facilitating support* reflects efforts to directly assist recipients, including offering information or advice about how to improve targeted attributes (informational support) and providing resources or engaging in activities to help produce change (tangible support). Partners can also respond negatively, such as criticizing or blaming recipients or demanding that recipients adopt their approach. The behaviors listed in Table 1, therefore, vary in terms of being helpful or unhelpful.

In general, higher levels of nurturant and action-facilitating behavior are associated with more positive postinteraction feelings of support, whereas more negative behavior is associated with perceiving the partner as less supportive (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, De Clercq, & Peene, 2005). Moreover, Feeney (2004, 2007) has provided suggestive evidence that partner support can actually be helpful. She found that feeling more supported during personal goal discussions predicts increased goal-related self-efficacy (Feeney, 2004). Furthermore, greater partner responsiveness during personal goal discussions—behaviors that could be classified as nurturant—predicted a greater probability of achieving that goal 6 months later (Feeney, 2007).

In contrast, diary studies by Bolger and colleagues suggest that visible support can produce unintended costs, such as drops in recipients' competence and self-efficacy. Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler (2000), for example, found that stressed individuals were more depressed and anxious when they reported more emotional support from their partner. In contrast, recipients experienced lower anxiety when their partner reported providing support but this support was not recorded by the recipient. Hence, Bolger et al. argue that invisible support, such as the partner taking care of unexpected domestic chores without informing the recipient, is most effective at helping recipients cope with stressors.

The potential costs of visible support might be less pronounced in the context of self-improvement, which probably involves lower stress and anxiety. Nevertheless, Bolger et al.'s (2000) research highlights the point that partners' support will not always help. Indeed, although recipients report greater felt support when their partners enact more positive forms of support during observed discussions (as described earlier), inconsistent and modest effect sizes across studies (rs range from .09 to .41, average r = .25) indicate that not all intended support behavior is evaluated as helpful.

The extent to which support behaviors are helpful depends on the needs and desires of the recipient. Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, and Gardner (2007) found that when disclosing emotional reactions to a stressor, recipients felt more understood when emotional support was provided. Support that did not match the emotional nature of the disclosure, such as providing information and advice, predicted negative partner evaluations postdiscussion. Similarly, Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, and Oriña (2007) found that people responded better to care that met their dispositional needs. During stressful interactions with their partners, for example, avoidantly attached people were rated as being more calmed by action-facilitating support, whereas secure people were more calmed by nurturant support.

The degree to which recipients find partners' support behavior helpful, therefore, should play a critical role in determining whether partners' support fosters self-improvement. Thus, we predicted that the links between partners' support behavior and successful self-improvement would be mediated by how helpful that support behavior was to recipients (see Figure 1). We also predicted that partners' support and helpfulness would influence recipients' evaluations of their relationships.

Partners' Support Behavior, Partners' Help, and Relationship Quality

Cross-sectional associations between observed support behavior and relationship well-being suggest that intimates

Table 1. Types of Partner Support

	Support behaviors
Nurturant support	
Emotional support	• Expresses love and affection • Provides reassurance and comfort and expresses sorrow or regret for the recipient's situation or distress • Encourages partner to explain point of view and express feelings about the issue • Communicates understanding and empathy regarding the partner's desired change, difficulty in producing change, and/or distress regarding the situation
Esteem support	• Compliments or says positive things about the partner and/or emphasizes the partner's abilities to bring about change • Validates and expresses agreement with partner's perspective on the situation or ways they can bring about change • Provides encouragement and comments positively regarding efforts and progress in bringing about change • Tries to alleviate the partner's negative feelings regarding the desired change and/or lift the partner's mood by highlighting barriers to change, external causes of problem, and difficulties in bringing about change (to reduce self-blame, derogation, and feeling of failure)
Action-facilitating support	
Information support	• Offers advice and ideas, and suggests actions to bring about change • Asks questions, searches for causes, and generates solutions or options to bringing about change • Provides detailed information, facts, or news about the situation or about skills needed to bring about the desired change or deal with the situation • Provides perspective and clarifies or reassess the situation (in a constructive manner) to find ways in which the behavior might be able to be changed (i.e., reframing situation, offering alternative courses of action, providing insight)
Tangible support	• Offers or agrees to join the partner in action that produces change or agrees to work toward the same goal • Offers or agrees to perform a task or do something that will help to bring about change • Offers or agrees to take over one or more of the partner's responsibilities while the partner is under stress or trying to bring about change • Expresses willingness to help
Negative support	
Criticize/blame	• Criticizes or derogates partner (e.g., insult, belittle, ridicule or make fun of in a hurtful way) • Accuses and blames partner for situation and/or any lack of success in bringing about change • Indicates negative consequences for partner if partner does not change • Expresses negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation, displeasure, frustration)
Control/invalidation	• Rejects and invalidates partner's point of view (e.g., be patronizing, use sarcasm, be condescending, treat partner as inferior) • Insists or demands that the partner think, feel or behave in a certain way (including insisting that the partner adopt his or her approach to bringing about change) • Talks from a position of authority and/or asserts or implies that self is more of an expert regarding the topic under discussion or is in a superior position to comment on the topic • Takes a domineering and/or nonnegotiative stance (e.g., not listen to partner, repeat own point of view, interrupt partner, control the conversation)

Note: These are the most common types of support measured. They were adapted from the Social Support Interaction Coding System (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), the Social Support Behavior Code (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), and the Interactive Coping Behavior Coding System (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995).

who are more satisfied behave more positively and less negatively during support interactions (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2008; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). However, only two prior studies have explored these links longitudinally. Comparing the interaction behavior of couples whose relationships were classified as distressed (separated, divorced, or low in satisfaction) versus satisfied 2 years later, Pasch and Bradbury (1998) found that women in distressed couples offered less positive support and behaved more negatively. Cobb, Davila, and Bradbury (2001) also reported that women who behaved negatively in support-related discussions reported lower satisfaction 1 year later.

This longitudinal evidence indicates that lower levels of support by women reduces relationship satisfaction and

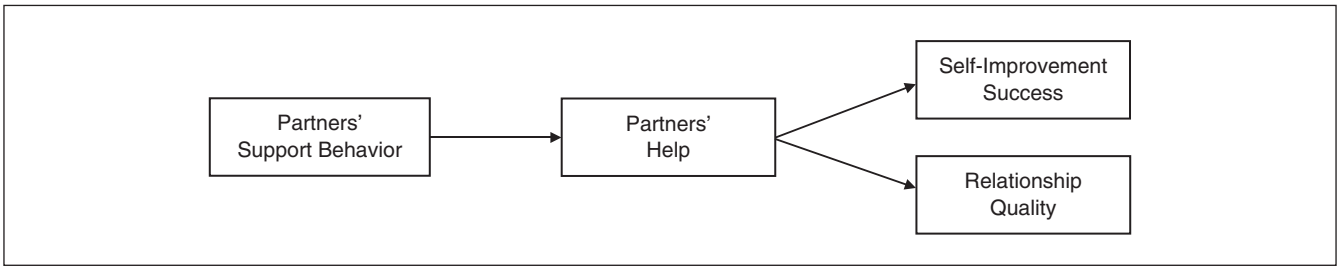

Figure 1. Proposed links between partners' support of self-improvement efforts and recipients' judgments of partners' help, self-improvement success, and relationship quality

increases instability. Prior work, however, has not demonstrated links between *partners'* support and changes in *recipients'* satisfaction. One reason for this might be that previous studies have not considered whether support behavior is helpful to recipients. Although nurturant and action-facilitating support may typically be positive for the relationship, how much the partner's support actually helps the recipient deal with a specific problem may well be the prime determinant of relationship satisfaction. Consistent with this proposition, Cutrona et al. (2007) found that support that did not match recipients' needs was associated with poorer concurrent satisfaction precisely because partners were judged to be less understanding. Accordingly, we predicted that the links between partner support behavior and recipients' relationship satisfaction would be mediated by how helpful recipients found that behavior (see Figure 1).

In sum, as depicted in Figure 1, the degree to which partners' support leads to long-term benefits should hinge on the extent to which recipients find the support helpful. In general, nurturant and action-facilitating partner support should be more helpful to recipients, whereas negative partner behavior should be relatively unhelpful. In turn, the more the partner helps, the more successful recipients should be in improving targeted self-attributes and the more satisfied they should become with their relationships.

Current Research

In Study 1, we conducted an initial test of the model depicted in Figure 1 by gathering self-reports of self-improvement efforts and success, perceptions of partners' support behavior and helpfulness, and relationship quality. In Study 2, we had observers code the support behavior exhibited by the partner when discussing recipients' self-improvement goals. We also collected postdiscussion assessments of partners' helpfulness and then followed couples over 1 year to assess self-improvement and relationship quality across time. We predicted that partners would be more helpful to the extent that they displayed more nurturant and action-facilitating support and less negative interaction behavior. We also predicted that greater partner help during the discussion would forecast more positive relationship evaluations and greater self-improvement success over the following year.

The research reviewed earlier offers indirect support for our predictions. The current research extends prior studies in several ways. First, the current research tests links between behaviors identified in the support literature and partners' help in achieving self-improvement goals. Research examining self-change has either relied on self-reports of partner supportiveness or affirmation (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1996; Drigotas et al., 1999) or measured general positive behavior within couples' interactions (e.g., Feeney, 2004, 2007; Rusbult et al., 2009).

Second, we test the extent to which partners' support and help yield success in improving specific attributes individuals claimed they were trying to change. Prior research, in contrast, has examined general representations of the ideal self (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009), discussions of personal goals in general (e.g., Feeney, 2004), expectations of achievement immediately following discussions (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Rusbult et al., 2009), or attainment of goals that are achievable within the period tested (e.g., Feeney, 2007).

Third, we test the links between partners' help and self-improvement success, controlling for a series of alternative explanations, including recipients' own support-seeking behavior, preexisting evaluations of the partner and the relationship, and the extent to which the issues being targeted cause problems in the relationship.

Fourth, we assess the impact of partners' help on both self-improvement success and relationship quality. Fifth, none of the prior studies distinguish between different forms of support. Nurturant support might be the most beneficial form (e.g., Cutrona et al., 2007), or both nurturant and action-facilitating support might independently promote self-improvement and relationship quality. Regardless, as outlined in Figure 1, the impact of either nurturant or action-facilitating support should ultimately depend on how helpful it is to the recipient.

Study 1

We conducted an initial test of the paths in Figure 1 by asking people in romantic relationships to identify three self-attributes

they wanted to improve. Participants reported on their self-improvement efforts and success over the past 6 months and rated how helpful their partner had been in producing desired changes. Participants also reported which support behaviors their partners generally enacted, and they evaluated the quality of their relationships. We predicted that greater nurturant and action-facilitating partner support would be more helpful to recipients and, in turn, would be associated with greater self-improvement success and more positive relationship evaluations (see Figure 1). In contrast, negative partner behavior should be less helpful and, in turn, predict poorer self-improvement success and relationship evaluations.

Method

Participants. Participants were 150 (84 women, 66 men) university students who were a mean age of 22.09 years (*SD* = 5.50). Mean relationship duration was 23.10 months (*SD* = 19.40). The majority (73%) of the sample was involved in serious relationships, living with their partner or married. Participants were reimbursed NZ$20.

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed the following measures in same-sex groups of 2-6 people.

Relationship quality, partner perceptions, and self-esteem. The short seven-item Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) was used to assess relationship quality (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?" 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). The Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale assessed global feelings of self-worth (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants also rated their partner on seven support-relevant attributes (e.g., understanding, supportive, sensitive; 1 = *not at all like my partner*, 7 = *very much like my partner*).

Self-improvement. Participants then identified three aspects of themselves that they (*not* their partner) wanted to change or improve over the past 6 months. Targeted attributes included discipline and managing work-related stress (25%), interpersonal qualities such as trust and patience (23%), developing more self-confidence (20%), and improving appearance and health (19%). Participants rated how much they had (a) tried to change (1 = *not tried at all to change myself*, 7 = *tried hard to change myself*) and (b) been successful at changing (1 = *attempts have not been successful*, 7 = *attempts have been successful*) each attribute, and (c) how helpful their partner had been in bringing about any change in each attribute (1 = *my partner has not been helpful at all*, 7 = *my partner has been very helpful*). Ratings of (a) self-improvement attempts, (b) self-improvement success, and (c) partner help were positively correlated across the three self-attributes (ranging from .25 to .52, *p*s < .01). Thus, each set of ratings was averaged to produce measures across targeted attributes.

Partner support. Following several filler scales, participants rated 22 items according to how often their partner had responded to their self-improvement efforts in a specific manner during the past 6 months (1 = *did not do this at all*, 7 = *did this very frequently*). The items assessed the behaviors described in Table 1 and were developed by rewording items from previous support scales (e.g., Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr, 1997) and coding schemes (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). An original pool of 48 items was pilot tested (*N* = 204). Removing items that loaded poorly or across factors revealed a four-factor solution (described later), and the best performing items were then used in Study 1. Six items tapped nurturant support, including emotional (e.g., my partner expressed understanding and empathy for my situation) and esteem (e.g., my partner complimented me) support. Seven items assessed action-facilitating support, including information (e.g., my partner made suggestions about how I could change) and tangible (e.g., my partner did something that helped me to change) support. Five items assessed negative support (e.g., my partner criticized the ways I was trying to change myself). The final items assessed minimizing (e.g., my partner felt that I was overreacting in wanting to change these aspects of myself), which was not independently related to the outcomes assessed in Studies 1 and 2 and is not discussed further. Items were averaged to create separate measures of nurturant, action-facilitating, and negative support.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for all measures. In general, participants reported high levels of self-improvement attempts, moderate self-improvement success and partner help, high nurturant and action-facilitating support, and low negative support. As predicted, greater nurturant and action-facilitating support was associated with perceiving the partner as more helpful, greater self-improvement success, and higher relationship quality. Negative partner behavior demonstrated the opposite pattern.

We used the EQS Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) program to (a) test all paths in Figure 1 simultaneously using the observed means and (b) calculate indirect effects testing whether partners' help mediated the links between partners' support behavior and relationship quality and self-improvement success. The models that best fit the data and include all significant paths are shown in Figure 2 (χ^2s = 1.93 to 5.13, *p*s > .08, comparative fit indexes = .97 to 1.00, root mean square errors of approximation = .00 to .10).

First, individuals who reported greater nurturant and action-facilitating support from their partner reported that he or she had been more helpful in bringing about self-improvement. These associations remained significant when controlling for the two outcome variables (i.e., adding self-improvement success and

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Across All Measures: Study 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M*	(*SD*)	α
Self-improvement											
1. Self-improvement attempts	—								5.31	(0.93)	.65
2. Self-improvement success	.47*	—							4.50	(1.12)	.54
3. Partner's help	.34*	.46*	—						4.83	(1.34)	.74
Partners' support behavior											
4. Nurturant	.10	.24*	.57*	—					5.29	(1.19)	.86
5. Action facilitating	.09	.19*	.55*	.63*	—				4.37	(1.44)	.91
6. Negative	–.15	–.21*	–.24*	–.42*	–.15	—			1.89	(1.11)	.84
7. Relationship quality	–.01	.19*	.58*	.51*	.35*	–.31*	—		5.70	(1.10)	.93
8. Partner perceptions	.11	.21*	.51*	.59*	.45*	–.35*	.69*	—	5.65	(1.02)	.89
9. Self-esteem	.04	.31*	.08	.07	.01	–.19*	.19*	.22*	4.83	(1.34)	.89

*$p < .05$.

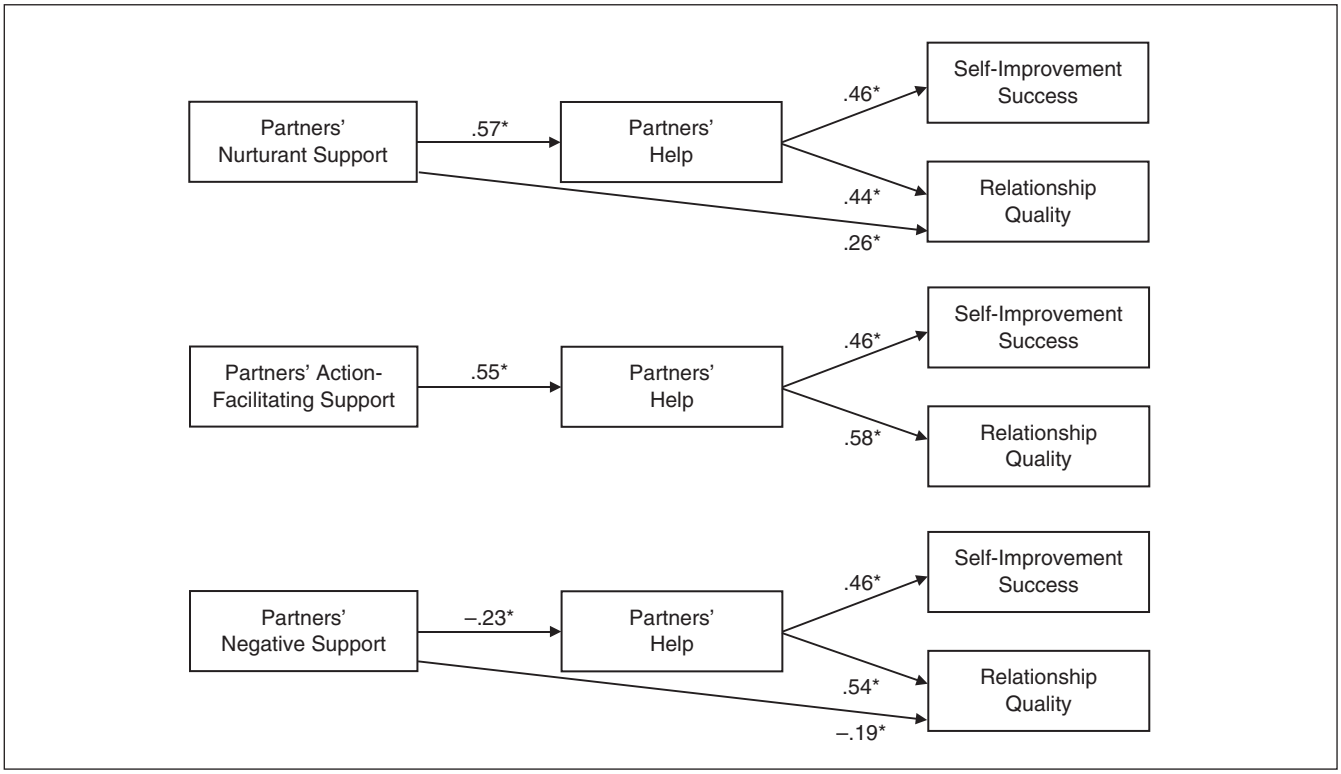

Figure 2. Path models testing the links between partners' support behavior and recipients' judgments of partners' help, self-improvement success, and relationship quality

Note: values are standardized path coefficients. None of the unmodeled paths are significant (βs = –.11 to .05, $p > .05$).

*$p < .05$.

relationship quality as additional predictors instead of dependent variables; βs = .37 to .49, *p*s < .05). More negative support was associated with less help, but this association was reduced when controlling for relationship quality (β = –.06).

Greater partner help, in turn, was associated with greater self-improvement success. Partners' support behavior was not associated with self-improvement success when controlling for how helpful partners had been (βs = –.04 to –.11), and significant indirect effects (.40 to .43, Sobel *z*s = 5.47 to 5.96, *p*s < .01) indicated that receiving more positive (or less negative) support from the partner predicted greater self-improvement because partners were more (or less) helpful.

Similarly, greater partner help was associated with more positive relationship evaluations. The direct links between partner support and relationship quality were also reduced but remained significant for nurturant and negative support. Nevertheless, significant indirect effects in all three models (indirect effects = .36 to .52, *z*s = 5.58 to 8.07, *p*s < .01) supported the hypothesis that more positive partner support was associated with greater relationship quality because partners were more helpful, and vice versa.

As shown in Table 2, the different forms of support were associated. Recalculating the models including each other type of support as additional predictors revealed that nurturant and action-facilitating support had independent effects (βs = .32 to .57, *p*s < .01), but the links between negative behavior and partners' help (β = .00) and relationship quality (β = –.13, *p* < .10) were reduced when controlling for nurturant support.

People who tried harder to change reported greater self-improvement success and greater partner help. Higher self-esteem and more positive partner evaluations were also associated with greater reported success, less negative and more positive partner support, and higher relationship quality (see Table 2). Nonetheless, when recalculating all models controlling for self-improvement attempts, self-esteem, and partner perceptions, all effects remained significant (βs = .34 to .66 and –.19 to –.23, *p*s < .01) except one; the link between negative support and partners' help was eliminated when controlling for partner perceptions (β = –.06). Gender, age, and relationship status were not associated with any of the measures modeled, and controlling for demographic variables had a negligible effect on the paths in Figure 2.

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that when partners provide nurturant and action-facilitating support for self-improvement efforts, partners are perceived as more helpful, and as a result, recipients are more satisfied with their relationship and experience greater self-improvement success. The effects of nurturant and action-facilitating support were independent and held when controlling for the extent of participants' self-improvement efforts and their global self- and partner evaluations. In contrast, negative support behavior was less helpful and predicted lower relationship quality because partners were perceived to be less nurturing and less supportive in general.

The obvious limitations in Study 1 are that all variables were self-reports gathered from individuals, and the analyses were cross-sectional. In Study 2, we tested the same models but analyzed objective measures of helping behavior in relationship dyads and assessed relationship quality and self-improvement across time.

Study 2

We collected objective measures of partners' support by coding the partners' support behaviors during couples' discussions of each others' most important self-improvement goal. We tested whether the type and degree of partners' help during the discussion influenced relationship quality and self-improvement success across the following year. We also coded the behavior of each support recipient. Recipients who criticize and blame their partners elicit more negative and unhelpful responses (Collins & Feeney, 2000) and experience greater relationship distress over time (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Accordingly, we examined the role of partners' support and help, controlling for the recipients' discussion behavior.

Method

Participants. Forty-seven heterosexual couples responded to campus advertisements. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 49 (*M* = 24.09, *SD* = 5.68). Mean relationship duration was 3.01 years (*SD* = 2.87), and 62% of the sample was living together or married. Of the remaining participants, 84% rated their relationship as "serious." This sample was also used by Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009) to examine communication within discussions about desired partner change. However, all discussions, behavioral codings, and analyses presented here are new. Relationship quality is the only measure used in both studies. Couples were paid NZ$40.

Procedure. In separate rooms, partners completed a scale assessing relationship quality and then identified and ranked according to importance three aspects of *themselves* they wanted to improve and three aspects of their *partner* they wanted improved. Participants were told they would discuss with their partners one self-attribute they desired to change. The most important ranked self-attribute was selected for discussion by the experimenter. To ensure the attribute was a personal self-improvement goal and not motivated by the partner's desires, if the partner also listed the top-ranked attribute as something that he or she wanted to change, the second-ranked feature was chosen.

Couples were reunited and, after a short warm-up discussion, discussed each partner's self-improvement goal for 5 min. Half of the sample discussed the female's self-improvement goal first, and the other half discussed the male's goal first. Within each discussion, the "recipient" was the individual who was trying to change the self-targeted attribute, and the "partner" was the individual who could be supportive. Partners independently completed questionnaires before and after each discussion (described later).

During the next year, participants completed four follow-up telephone interviews at 3-month intervals. Thirteen couples ended their relationship during the year, and 1 couple withdrew from the study, leaving the 47 couples described previously who completed all follow-up phases. Intact versus dissolved couples did not differ in the support behaviors displayed during the discussion but intact couples were, on average, 3 years older, and males from dissolved couples rated discussed topics as more serious relationship problems, perceived their partners as less helpful, and reported lower relationship quality at the initial session (*t*s > 2.00, *p*s < .05).[1]

Table 3. Means (and Standard Deviations) of Interaction Behavior and Prediscussion and Postdiscussion Ratings

		Female feature				Male feature			
	IR	Women (support recipient)		Men (support provider)		Men (support recipient)		Women (support provider)	
Support provider behavior									
Nurturant	.89			2.19	(0.80)			2.30	(1.01)
Action facilitating	.86			2.86	(0.82)			3.01	(1.07)
Negative	.97			1.43	(0.56)			1.95	(0.86)
Support recipient behavior									
Positive	.87	3.79	(1.09)			3.58	(0.94)		
Negative	.94	1.67	(0.83)			1.28	(0.46)		
Prediscussion ratings									
Discussed previously		5.02	(1.67)	4.85	(1.46)	4.87	(1.47)	4.96	(1.63)
Desired change		6.09	(0.78)	4.43	(1.56)	5.85	(0.99)	4.57	(1.77)
Problem severity		4.15	(1.33)	3.68	(1.52)	3.87	(1.45)	3.38	(1.56)
Postdiscussion ratings									
Discussion realism		5.55	(1.38)	5.38	(1.21)	5.49	(1.14)	5.47	(1.37)
Partner's help		5.90	(1.11)			5.56	(1.02)		

Note: IR = interrater reliability and is the average *r* between coders' ratings across discussions and gender.

Measures

Relationship quality, partner perceptions, and self-esteem. The same measures used in Study 1 were used to assess relationship quality, partner perceptions, and self-esteem. All measures had good internal reliability (αs > .80). Both men and women reported positive evaluations of relationship quality (*M*s = 6.03 and 6.16, *SD*s = .67 and .62), partner perceptions (*M*s = 5.74 and 5.83, *SD*s = .88 and .83), and self-worth (*M*s = 5.47 and 5.31, *SD*s = .94 and 1.04).

Prediscussion ratings. Before the discussions, each partner rated the extent to which (a) the couple had already discussed the topic (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*), (b) the targeted feature was a serious problem in their relationship (1 = *not at all serious*, 7 = *extremely serious*), and (c) they desired change in the targeted feature (1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*).

Postdiscussion ratings. Immediately following each discussion, each partner rated whether the discussion was realistic and reflected how the couple normally discussed the issue (1 = *not at all realistic*, 7 = *extremely realistic*). Support recipients also rated how much their partner helped them with the issue (1 = *did not help me at all*, 7 = *helped me very much*), how much they valued (1 = *did not value at all*, 7 = *valued partner very much*) and appreciated (*1 = did not appreciate at all*, 7 = *appreciated partner very much*) their partner's input, and how much they felt supported by their partner (1 = *not at all supported*, 7 = *extremely supported*). These four ratings were averaged to measure partners' help (αs = .93 and .89).

Assessments over time. During the follow-up telephone interviews, each partner verbally completed the PRQC inventory to assess relationship quality (αs = .83 to .89). Each partner was then reminded of the self-improvement goals discussed at the initial session and rated the extent to which the support recipient had demonstrated change (1 = *not changed at all*, 7 = *changed this feature a lot*) and been effective or successful in bringing about change (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) in the feature discussed. These ratings were highly correlated at each follow-up (average *r* = .84) and averaged to measure self-improvement success.

Coding Procedure. Two trained coders independently rated the extent to which the types of support described in Table 1 were exhibited by each partner (1-2 = *low*, 3-5 = *moderate*, 6-7 = *high*). The specific behaviors (e.g., expressing love and affection) associated with each type of support (e.g., emotional support) were adapted from prior coding schemes (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Interactions were first coded for emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support. In a second wave of coding, criticize/blame and control/invalidation were rated. Coder ratings were highly correlated (*r*s = .82 to .98; Table 3 displays average *r*s across discussions) and averaged to construct scores for each support type.

Principal component analyses established that the ratings formed three factors representing nurturant, action-facilitating, and negative partner support, which accounted for 77.01% and 72.67% of the variance for women and men, respectively. Accordingly, emotional and esteem support were averaged to assess partners' nurturant support, informational and tangible support were averaged to measure partners' action-facilitating support, and criticizing/blaming and invalidation were averaged to index negative support behavior.

The valence of recipients' behavior was also coded for the support-seeking behaviors outlined by Pasch and Bradbury (1998) and Barbee and Cunningham (1995). Positive support seeking included (a) directly asking for help, explaining the situation, and assessing solutions, and (b) communicating regard and responding with affection to partners' suggestions, offers, or actions to help. Negative support-seeking included (a) criticizing and blaming the partner and (b) rejecting or invalidating the partner's help. Coder ratings were highly correlated (*r*s = .81 to .98; see Table 3) and constituted two factors accounting for 78.47% and 72.11%, respectively, of the variance distinguishing positive and negative support seeking described earlier. Positive and negative scores were constructed accordingly.

Targeted self-attributes. Categorization of targeted attributes by two independent coders (91% agreement) revealed that 46% comprised interpersonal qualities such as trust, patience, and controlling one's temper. Personal attributes such as physical appearance, fitness (20%), and finances, ambition, and motivation (25%) were also commonly targeted, with a smaller category involving self-confidence and self-esteem (9%).

Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for all behavioral and pre- and postdiscussion measures. Participants rated their discussions as realistic and reflecting how the issue was normally discussed. The majority of topics had been discussed previously (94%), and most a good deal (70% ratings > 4), suggesting that most participants were currently trying to change the discussed features. Recipients desired high levels of self-improvement. Recipients' partners also indicated a moderate but lower desire for the recipient to change but, nonetheless, exhibited greater positive than negative support, and recipients generally perceived their partners as being helpful.

Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations for the measures gathered across time. Most couples retained positive evaluations of their relationship and reported moderate levels of change in targeted attributes across the year.

As outlined in Figure 1, we predicted that more positive forms of support behavior by the partner would be more helpful to recipients, and greater partner help would, in turn, be associated with greater (a) self-improvement and (b) relationship quality over time. Because of the number of variables modeled when analyzing dyads and because our across-time analyses involved latent factors, we modeled self-improvement and relationship quality in separate analyses.

Partners' Support Behavior, Partners' Help, and Self-Improvement Across Time. We first tested the extent to which partners' support behavior during the discussion predicted recipients' perceptions of their partners' helpfulness and whether partners' help, in turn, predicted self-improvement over the following year. We followed the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) using the EQS SEM program. Our analytic approach is illustrated in Figure 3. The first stage of the model displays links between the observed support provided by the partner and recipients' reports of how helpful their partners were during the discussion (analyzed using the observed means). The double-headed arrows running between male and female observer-coded behavior and male and female evaluations of their partner's help accounts for the nonindependence in the variables across partners. The within-individual associations (e.g., running between women's support when providing support and women's reports of their partner's helpfulness when receiving support) were not significant (with one exception noted in Figure 3). Including the within-individual paths had a negligible influence on the size of the effects shown in Figure 3, which all remained significant. Thus, we excluded these from the model.

The second stage of Figure 3 tests the extent to which partners' help during the discussion predicted self-improvement across the following year. The four ratings of self-improvement success at each follow-up were used as equal indicators of a latent factor representing self-improvement across the year, with the errors correlated within each time-point across couple members. Participants were specifically asked how much they had demonstrated change and been successful in improving discussed features within each 3-month follow-up period. This measure directly assessed successful change, and thus, the resultant latent factor indexes average amount of improvement in discussed features over the course of the year. Any positive paths between partners' help and this latent factor demonstrate that greater partner help at the initial session predicts greater self-improvement across the following year[2] (see Overall et al., 2009, for an example of this analytic strategy).

Equivalent analyses were conducted separately for nurturant, action-facilitating, and negative support (as shown in Figure 3). All paths were pooled across gender and there were no significant gender differences in any of the paths, LM χ^2s(1, 61) = .11 to .17, *p*s > .28.[3] The resulting standardized path coefficients, shown in Figure 3, supported our predictions. When partners displayed higher levels of nurturant and action-facilitating support (top and middle panels, respectively), recipients reported their partners as being more helpful. In contrast, more negative support by the partner was relatively unhelpful (see bottom panel in Figure 3). Second, the more helpful recipients found the partner during the discussion, the more successful they were at improving targeted self-attributes across the following year.

Does partners' support behavior influence self-improvement via partners' perceived helpfulness? Models including only direct paths between partners' observed support behavior and self-improvement over time (and not partners' help) suggest that more nurturant (βs = .16 and .18 for women and men, respectively) and action-facilitating (βs = .17 and .14) support

Table 4. Means (and Standard Deviations) of Measures at 3-, 6-, 9-, and 12-Month Follow-Up

	3-month				6-month				9-month				12-month			
	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
Support recipient reports																
Self-improvement success	4.17	(1.40)	4.28	(1.25)	4.35	(1.43)	3.84	(1.36)	4.03	(1.43)	4.49	(1.48)	4.15	(1.55)	4.38	(1.52)
Support provider reports																
Self-improvement success	4.77	(1.07)	4.36	(1.56)	4.22	(1.68)	4.37	(1.33)	4.51	(1.67)	4.46	(1.44)	4.30	(1.83)	4.24	(1.46)
Relationship quality	6.24	(0.61)	6.15	(0.52)	6.24	(0.65)	6.15	(0.57)	6.22	(0.69)	6.08	(0.69)	6.23	(0.64)	6.08	(0.82)

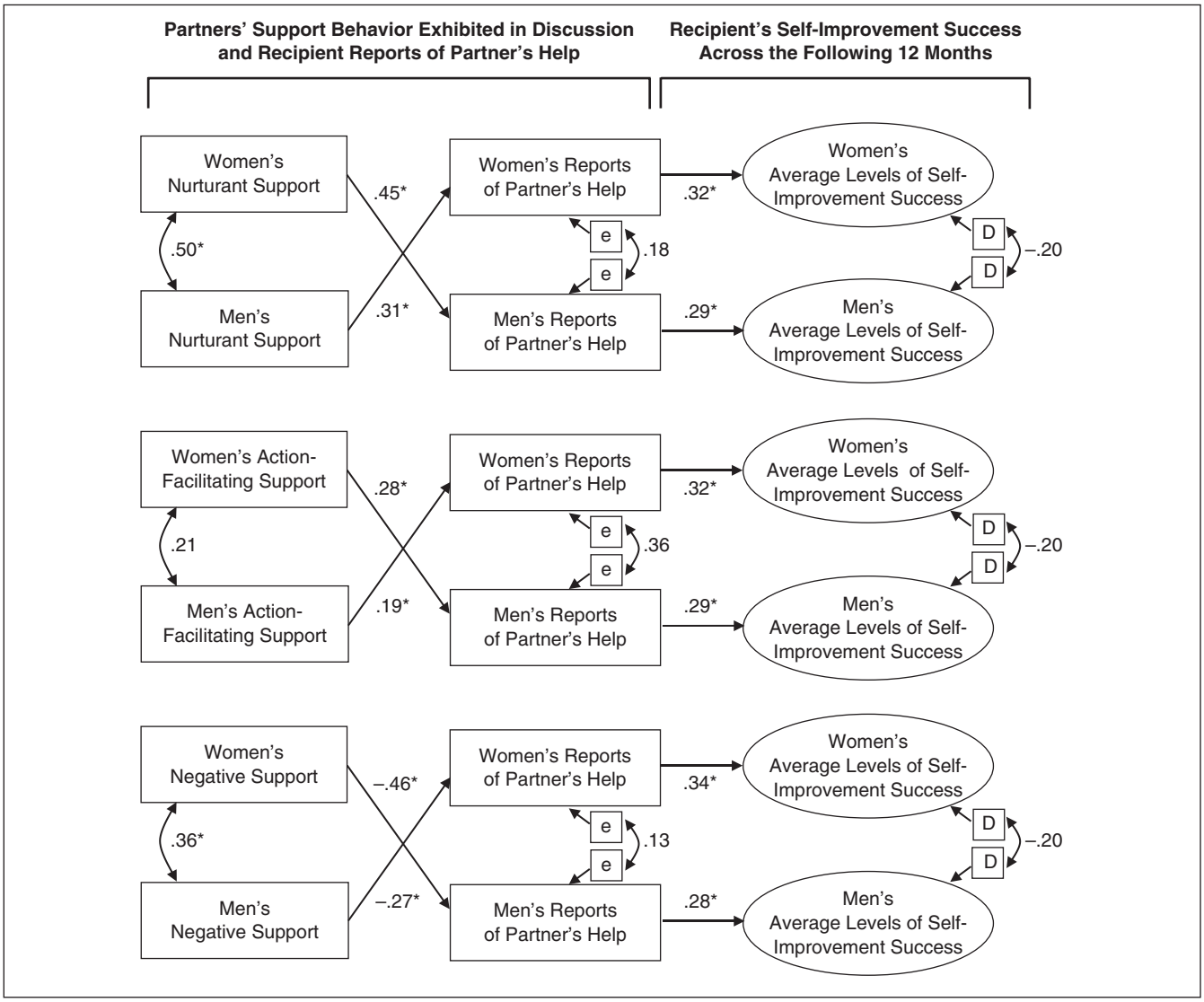

Figure 3. Path models testing the associations between partners' support behavior exhibited when discussing recipients' self-improvement goals, recipients' reports of partner help, and self-improvement success across time

Note: Values are standardized path coefficients. Participants' ratings of self-improvement success for all four follow-up time points served as indicators for the latent factor representing average level of self-improvement success across time. For simplicity, indicators are not shown. None of the unmodeled paths were significant (βs = –.15 to .16, *p*s > .10), with the exception that men's negative support was associated with reporting that their partners were less helpful when men were recipients (β = –.44, *p* > .01). All paths remained significant when unmodeled paths were included.

*$p < .05$.

was associated with greater self-improvement, but these effects were not significant (*p*s > .15). Negative partner behavior also did not significantly predict self-improvement (βs = –.03 and –.02). Nevertheless, we hypothesized that partners' support behavior would facilitate self-improvement to the extent that the behavior was helpful to recipients. Providing good evidence for this prediction, the indirect effects testing whether nurturant (.10 and .12 for women and men, respectively, Sobel $z = 1.99$, $p < .05$), action-facilitating (.07 and .08, $z = 1.78$, $p = .08$), and negative (–.11 and –.16, $z = –2.35$, $p < .05$) support behavior by the partner influenced self-improvement via recipients' evaluations of partners' help were significant or marginally significant. These results indicate that greater partner help arising from nurturing and action-facilitating support facilitates the achievement of self-improvement goals, whereas negative, and therefore unhelpful, support hinders self-improvement.

Partners' Judgments of Recipients' Self-Improvement. We also examined whether partners' judgments of recipients' self-improvement reflected the improvement reported by recipients. Supporting the accuracy of recipients' reports, partners reported levels of self-improvement similar to those of recipients (see Table 4), and factors modeling partner and recipient reports were strongly associated (β = .60, $p < .01$). We also repeated the analyses shown in Figure 3 substituting recipients' reports of self-improvement with *partners'* reports of recipients' self-improvement. To account for bias in partners' judgments, we controlled for significant associations between how helped partners felt with regard to both their own self-improvement efforts and perceptions that the recipient had been successful in their self-improvement attempts (βs = .26 and .30 for men and women, respectively, $ps < .05$). Consistent with Figure 3, men reported that their female partners demonstrated greater self-improvement over the year when women perceived they (the men) had been more helpful during the discussion (β = .30, $p = .05$). The equivalent effect analyzing women's judgments of male's self-improvement was not significant (β = –.12).

Partners' Support Behavior, Partners' Help, and Relationship Quality Across Time. We next tested whether partners' support and perceived helpfulness predicted recipients' relationship quality across time. Replicating the analytic approach described earlier, the first stage of the model calculated the links between partners' support behavior and recipients' reports of their partners' help during the discussion (see Figure 4). To test the degree to which partners' help during the discussion predicted levels of relationship quality across the following year, the four ratings of relationship quality at each follow-up were used as equal indicators of a latent factor representing average relationship quality across the year. Importantly, we controlled for relationship quality at the initial testing session by adding Time 1 relationship quality to the model, including within- and across-partner correlations with partners' support behavior, and paths between initial relationship quality and (a) partners' help (βs = .39 and .40 for men and women, respectively, $p < .05$,) and (b) average relationship quality across time (βs = .59 and .69, $p < .01$). Thus, any significant paths running from partners' help to average levels of relationship quality over time would reveal a predicted decrease or increase over and above initial levels of relationship quality. This approach also controlled for relationship evaluations when calculating the links between partners' support behavior and recipients' judgments of partners' help.[4]

The resulting standardized path coefficients are shown in Figure 4. As before, more nurturant and action-facilitating support (top two panels) were associated with greater evaluations of partners' help, whereas more negative support (bottom panel) predicted lower perceived partner help. Note that these paths are weaker than those in Figure 3 because in these models the paths were calculated controlling for initial relationship quality. Second, as predicted, the more helpful partners were during the discussion, the greater recipients' relationship quality was during the next year.

Third, although the unmediated effects between partners' nurturant (βs = .06 and .08 for women and men, respectively), action-facilitating (βs = .00 and .00), and negative (βs = –.02 and –.03) support provision and relationship quality over time were not significant, the indirect effects testing whether nurturant (βs =.06 and .09, $z = 2.25$, $p = .02$), action-facilitating (βs =.05 and .07, $z = 1.89$, $p = .06$), and negative (βs = –.06 and –.10, $z = -2.82$, $p = .01$) support behavior by the partner contributed to changes in relationship quality via recipients' perceptions of partners' help were significant or marginally significant. Thus, more nurturant and action-facilitating support is more helpful and therefore positively influences relationship evaluations, whereas more negative and unhelpful support negatively influences relationship evaluations.

Associations Across Types of Support Provision and Support Seeking. Table 5 displays the links between individuals' own support-seeking and support provision behavior (top of Table 5) and the links between partners' support provision and recipients' support-seeking behavior (bottom of Table 5). Because types of support provision were significantly associated with one another, we recalculated the effects of partners' support, including each other type of support as additional predictors. These analyses revealed that nurturant, action-facilitating, and negative support all independently predicted how helpful the partners' behavior was to recipients (βs = .18 to .36 and –.22 to –.44, $ps < .05$).

The valence of support providers' and recipients' behavior was also generally matched within and across partners (e.g., more nurturing support was associated with more positive and less negative recipient behavior). Recipients also reported that their partners provided more help when recipients behaved more positively and less negatively during the discussion, even when controlling for relationship quality (βs = .23 to .24 and –.16 to –.26, $ps < .05$). Furthermore, more negative recipient behavior was associated with lower self-improvement across time (βs = –.29 and –.16 for women and men, respectively, $p = .05$,), whereas more positive support seeking predicted greater self-improvement (βs = .22 and .19, $p = .08$). However, adding recipients' negative and positive behavior as additional predictors did not alter the paths reported in Figures 3 and 4 (βs = .15 to .44 and –.18 to –.44, $ps < .05$). Instead, controlling for partners' help reduced the links between negative (βs = –.22 and –.11) and positive (βs =.13 and .10) support seeking, suggesting that negative recipient behavior predicted poorer self-improvement because recipients elicited less helpful support from their partners, and vice versa.

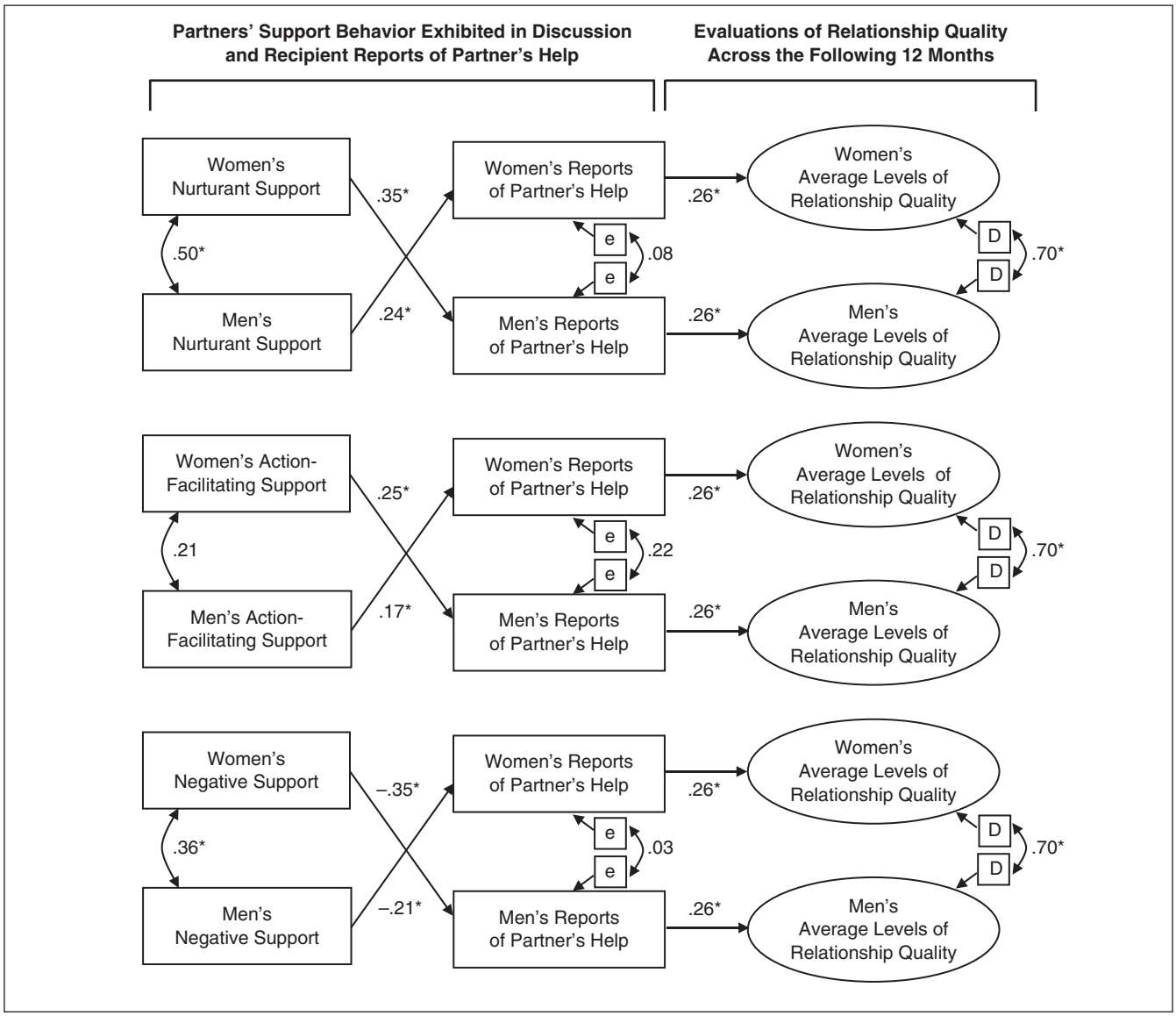

Figure 4. Path models testing the associations between partners' support behavior exhibited when discussing recipients' self-improvement goals, recipients' reports of partner help, and relationship quality across time

Note: Values are standardized path coefficients. Participants' relationship quality ratings for all four follow-up time points served as indicators for the latent factor representing average level of relationship quality across time. For simplicity, indicators are not shown. All paths were calculated with initial levels of relationship quality controlled. None of the unmodeled paths were significant (βs = –.16 to .10, *p*s > .10), with the exception that men's negative support was associated with reporting that their partners were less helpful when men were recipients (β = –.40, p > .01). All paths remained significant when unmodeled paths were included.

*p < .05.

Alternative Explanations. When targeted features posed more serious relationship problems and partners desired greater change in recipients, partners provided less nurturant support (*r*s = –.18 to –.41). Men also reported less help when their female partners rated the feature as a more serious relationship problem (r = –.37, p < .05). Nonetheless, controlling for partners' and recipients' desired change and problem severity had negligible effects on the paths in Figures 3 and 4.

When recipients rated their partners' general warmth and understanding higher, they and their partners behaved more positively and less negatively in the discussion (*r*s = .17 to .35 and –.25 to –.27) and recipients' improved more across time (βs = .34 and .32, p < .01). Despite strong associations

Table 5. Correlations Across Support Provider and Recipient Behavior

	1	2	3	4	5
Within-individual associations					
Support provider behavior					
1. Nurturant	—	.40*	–.35*	.59*	–.29*
2. Action facilitating	.15	—	–.05	.45*	–.08
3. Negative	–.06	.25**	—	–.40*	.72*
Support recipient behavior					
4. Positive	.35*	.01	–.15	—	–.43*
5. Negative	–.14	–.05	.40*	–.06	—
Across-partner associations					
Support provider behavior					
1. Nurturant	.50*	–.10	–.27**	.42*	–.30*
2. Action-Facilitating	.24	.21	–.09	–.20	.23
3. Negative	–.29*	.34*	.36*	–.12	.17
Support recipient behavior					
4. Positive	.21	–.22	–.26**	.53*	–.18
5. Negative	–.32*	.28*	.34*	.12	.19

*$p < .05$. **$p < .10$

between global partner evaluations and partners' help in the discussion (*rs* = .52 and .66 for women and men, respectively), controlling for partners' general warmth and understanding did not reduce the links between partners' support behavior and partners' help. The connections between partners' help and self-improvement were only slightly reduced (βs = .25 and .23, $p < .10$), whereas links with general partner evaluations were eliminated (βs = .11 and .10, $p = .40$). Moreover, partners' help continued to predict greater relationship quality across time (βs = .25 and .23, $p < .05$), whereas partner perceptions did not (βs = .04, $p = .68$).

Finally, participants who had higher self-esteem reported less change across the year (βs = –.29 and –.27), perhaps because their self-evaluations are less contingent on improving specific self-attributes or because they are less prone to exaggerate reports of change. Nonetheless, controlling for self-esteem did not reduce the paths in Figure 3.

Discussion

By assessing support behavior displayed by romantic partners when they discuss self-improvement goals and then tracking self-improvement and relationship quality across 12 months, these results replicate and extend the findings of Study 1. As expected, greater nurturant and action-facilitating partner support was more helpful to recipients, which in turn predicted greater self-improvement success and more positive relationship evaluations across time. More negative behavior revealed the opposite pattern. In addition, more negative and less positive support seeking was associated with less self-improvement, and this was because partners helped less when recipients behaved more negatively, and vice versa. Finally, the effects were not a function of how much change was desired, how much the discussed feature posed a problem for the relationship, initial relationship quality, global evaluations of partners' warmth and supportiveness, or self-esteem.

However, although tests of the indirect effects indicated that partners' support behavior influenced self-improvement and relationship quality via recipients' judgments of their partner's helpfulness, there were no significant unmediated links between partners' support behavior and the longitudinal measures. In longitudinal designs, distal effects become diluted over time as they are transmitted through intervening variables and affected by random and competing factors. For these reasons, mediation processes can be more powerfully detected than the total effect (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). In this case, the direct links between partners' support behavior and both self-improvement and relationship quality likely became weaker over time as partners' helpfulness played the active role in facilitating self-improvement and shaping relationship evaluations. As suggested by Bolger et al. (2000), perhaps partners' support also had opposing costs via drops in self-efficacy or esteem. Regardless of either possibility, the results provide strong evidence that the extent to which partners' support behavior positively influences self-improvement and relationship quality over time depends on whether the behavior is helpful to recipients.

General Discussion

The current research provides strong evidence that receiving more help from romantic partners when trying to improve the self boosts self-improvement success and relationship

quality. We discuss the importance, implications, and limitations of these results by addressing each path in Figure 1.

Partners' Support Behavior and Partners' Help

First, we found that the degree to which partners were helpful was tied to the types of support they enacted. Prior support typologies suggest that emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible support should be important (see Table 1). Our analyses demonstrated these different types of support load onto two broader categories: efforts to console and encourage (nurturant) and direct assistance in the form of advice or tangible aid (action facilitating).[5] As predicted, partners who offered more nurturing and action-facilitating support were more helpful to recipients, and these effects were independent of each other.

Showing that different types of support are independently associated with perceptions of partners' help demonstrates that partners were not simply more helpful when they behaved with greater positivity. These independent effects are also informative about how partners can be helpful. Nurturant support is often assumed to be of primary importance (e.g., Cutrona et al., 2007; Feeney, 2004, 2007). Our results demonstrate that partners who provide either nurturant or action-facilitating support are helpful, which in turn facilitates recipient self-improvement and relationship well-being.

Partners who criticized and invalidated the concerns of recipients, in contrast, reduced the degree to which they were helpful to recipients, regardless of how much nurturant and action-facilitating support they offered (Study 2). Thus, negative behavior has effects above and beyond the levels of positive support offered. This finding is consistent with a recent diary study showing that partner help and hindrance (i.e., partners expressing negative affect and/or limiting personal action) independently affected daily relationship feelings (Rafaeli, Cranford, Green, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008). Feeney and Thrush (2010) also recently found that interference from partners during an experimental activity reduced recipients' performance, confidence, and self-esteem. Extending these findings, our results suggest that the short-term impact of negative and unhelpful support tends to thwart the attainment of personal goals and relationship satisfaction over time. We turn to these important consequences next.

Partners' Help and Self-Improvement Success

When partners behaved less negatively, provided more nurturant and action-facilitating support, and were thus more helpful, recipients reported greater self-improvement (Study 1) and larger changes in targeted attributes across 1 year (Study 2). Our findings extend prior research by providing evidence of the important role partner support plays in facilitating self-improvement by uniquely (a) examining different forms of support that capture various types identified in the wider support literature, (b) assessing improvement of specific attributes that individuals were trying to improve, (c) measuring immediate partner help and then tracking actual improvement across time, (d) accounting for recipients' self-improvement behavior, and (e) analyzing these processes with both couple members.

Nurturant support should facilitate self-improvement by communicating understanding and counteracting goal-related feelings of low self-worth, whereas action-facilitating support should help by providing extra resources and helping partners formulate specific strategies to achieve changes and overcome obstacles. Both should increase self-efficacy and, in turn, reinforce goal focus and persistence. Our results suggest that negative partner behavior not only fails to provide these benefits, it independently *undermines* self-improvement efforts. Our results are uninformative about the potential mechanisms driving this outcome because we did not measure changes in planning, self-efficacy, or recipients' efforts across time, which is an important task for future research.

What the results do demonstrate, however, is that how helpful partners are perceived to be when they provide support determines the *partner's* contribution to self-improvement success. Judgments of partners' help provided retrospectively (Study 1) and immediately after a relevant discussion (Study 2) should reflect the degree to which partners are generally helpful. Indeed, the longitudinal results in Study 2 confirmed that our methods provided good assessments of partners' support and help across these relationships. The central role of judgments of partners' help is consistent with social support models. That is, perceiving greater support when faced with stressful life events produces more benign appraisals of the event and enhances coping, thereby promoting more positive psychological and physiological responses (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In the context of self-improvement goals, trusting that the partner will be helpful probably fosters greater confidence when goal-related difficulties are encountered, and thus, recipients will be more persistent and successful in their improvement efforts (see Feeney, 2004, 2007, for similar arguments).

Recipients' own efforts and behavior are also important in achieving self-improvement. We found, for example, that negative support seeking by recipients predicted lower self-improvement across time. Moreover, when recipients behaved more negatively, their partners responded more negatively, provided less positive forms of support, and were less helpful. Importantly, control analyses indicated it was because they elicited less helpful partner support that recipients who behaved more negatively showed less improvement. The impact of partners' support and help were also unaltered when controlling for how much recipients desired (Study 2) or tried (Study 1) to change. These results emphasize the powerful influence partners' help can have for recipients' self-improvement success.

Partners' Help and Relationship Quality

When partners behaved less negatively, provided more nurturant and action-facilitating support, and were thus more helpful, recipients also evaluated their relationships more positively. This research is the first to test whether partners' support during discussions of desired self-improvement forecasts greater relationship quality over time. We argued that the impact of partners' support behavior should depend on whether that support is helpful to recipients. Accordingly, the immediate helpfulness of partners' behavior predicted recipients' evaluations of relationship quality across the year. Thus, the degree to which relationship partners' actively assist and foster personal growth seems to be an important determinant of relationship well-being. When partners are less helpful, in contrast, intimates become less satisfied with their relationships.

By clarifying the role of recipients' judgments of their partners' help, this research sheds new light on contemporary theories regarding why partner support should benefit relationship health. In Rusbult and colleagues' model, for example, partner affirmation is hypothesized to promote relationship well-being because individuals move closer to their ideal selves. However, in their studies (e.g., Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009), the links between self-ideal movement and relationship satisfaction have been weak and inconsistent. In the current studies, self-improvement and relationship quality were also unrelated and were independent outcomes of partners' support and help. Hence, it is not the amount of change achieved by recipients that influences relationship evaluations but the degree to which partner support is judged as helpful in the self-improvement process.

These results provide support for Reis, Clark, and Holmes's (2004) proposal that supportive behaviors should have a positive influence on relationship security and satisfaction when partners are responsive, understanding, and validating. Supporting a fine distinction between general perceptions of support and partner responsiveness, we found the links between the receipt of helpful support and relationship satisfaction across time emerged above and beyond general perceptions of the partners' understanding and sensitivity. Our findings provide striking evidence that the helpfulness of specific supportive acts shapes relationship evaluations over and above global evaluations of the partners' warmth, understanding, and supportiveness.

Our results also inform the visible versus invisible support debate. As described previously, visible support can have unintentional costs, such as increased depression and anxiety, whereas invisible support can facilitate coping (Bolger et al., 2000). Maisel and Gable (2009), however, found that on days when the partner was perceived as understanding and validating, visible support did not produce negative mood and instead predicted greater relationship connectedness. In contrast, on days when partners were rated low in responsiveness, invisible support was associated with greater sadness and lower connectedness. Thus, as our results show, regardless of the visibility of partners' support, it is the degree to which support is helpful to recipients (and hence displays understanding and responsiveness) that will determine whether support fosters or hinders self-improvement and relationship well-being. Moreover, extending this further, we demonstrated that partners' help within specific, goal-related interactions had a powerful influence on recipients achieving their self-improvement goals and maintaining relationship satisfaction over a 1-year period.

Additional Caveats and Conclusions

We replicated our results using both retrospective reports and objective coding of partners' supportive behavior. Nonetheless, in both studies we relied on recipients' reports of self-improvement. This could be regarded as problematic given the potential for recipients' reports to be biased by their self-evaluations. In both studies, however, controlling for self-esteem and recipients' improvement desires and attempts did not reduce the impact of partners' help on self-improvement. Moreover, the results remained robust when controlling for relationship and partner evaluations. These findings provide strong evidence that recipients' ratings of self-improvement—and our results—are not merely a function of sentiment override or global feelings toward the partner or the relationship.

In addition, in Study 2, we assessed partners' judgments of recipients' self-improvement. Partners' perceptions of recipients' self-improvement and recipients' ratings of their self-improvement were strongly correlated, supporting the veracity of recipients' reports. Women who received more partner help also showed greater improvement as reported by their male partners, although it is unclear why this association was not found for female partners' reports. Importantly, as Rusbult et al. (2009) have argued, personal growth is a phenomenological experience and, therefore, pivots on whether recipients believe they have reached desired goals. Moreover, it is the progress that individuals believe they have made that influences personal well-being (Brunstein, 1993). Thus, recipients' judgments regarding their own self-improvement are crucial measures of successful change.

Decades of research in the interdependence tradition show that intimates' actions and goals are influenced by the actions and goals of their partners. Our results indicate that the achievement of desired self-improvement is no exception: Unhelpful support impedes self-improvement whereas helpful partner support facilitates it. This process might be more pronounced the more interdependent couples become. Participants in our samples were relatively young, and their relationships had existed for an average of only 2 to 3 years, although analyses controlling for age, relationship length, and issue seriousness did not alter the results. Another

implication of interdependence is that less than desirable self-attributes of the sort participants identified (i.e., low trust, poor self-confidence, troubled finances, concerns about attractiveness) should also be of consequence to partners. Indeed, partners indicated a moderate desire for recipients to improve their targeted attributes, and they provided less nurturant support the more change they (the partners) desired. Nonetheless, the results remained unaltered when controlling for the degree to which the targeted attributes caused problems for the partner or the relationship.

In sum, despite inevitable limitations, our results replicated across two studies using different methods and were remarkably robust. This research provides the strongest and clearest evidence that helpful partner support promotes personal growth and well-being through facilitating the achievement of self-improvement goals. In contrast, partners who are critical, invalidating, and less helpful limit their partners' ability to realize their self-improvement goals. The personal goals and psychology of the self are thus thoroughly intertwined with the nature and quality of the individuals' intimate relationships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. We recalculated the analyses using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) to estimate the models with missing data to include data for the waves completed by the 13 couples who broke up during the year. The coefficients shown in Figures 3 and 4 increased in significance. Excluding dissolved couples is more appropriate, however, because their data are not missing at random. Instead, probability of missing data is likely to be predicted by the missing values, such as lower relationship quality. Consistently, when examining FIML-based structural equation models that tracked relationship quality across time, homogeneity tests revealed significant differences between the means and covariances of intact versus dissolved groups, $\chi^2(19, 55) = 93.58$, $p = .00$, indicating that we should not specify the models including dissolved couples.
2. We simultaneously tested an additional latent factor representing the rate of change (i.e., slope) in self-improvement across the four time points (i.e., whether self-improvement increased, reduced, or remained the same at each time point). Note that because we directly assessed whether targeted partners had changed the discussed feature within each assessment period, our main analyses predict a factor indexing the average amount of improvement in discussed features over the course of the year—the pivotal measure of primary interest. In this case the slope only provides additional information regarding the consistency of improvement at each time point, taking into account overall amounts of improvement. Recipients, on average, reported similar levels of self-improvement at each follow-up ($M_{slope} = .03$, $z = .62$, $p > .05$), and rate of self-improvement did not significantly differ across individuals ($Var_{slope} = .01$, $z = .10$, $p > .05$). Consequently, there were no significant predictors of rate of self-improvement across time.
3. Although the paths were constrained to be equal across men and women, the standardized path coefficients reported can differ due to gender differences in the variances of the measure.
4. As before, we simultaneously tested an additional latent factor representing the slope or rate of change in relationship quality across the four time points (i.e., whether levels of relationship quality increased, reduced, or remained the same across the year; the slope). Levels of relationship quality were, on average, stable across time ($M_{slope} = –.01$, $z = –.16$, *ns*), and there was no significant variation across the sample in the stability of relationship quality across the year ($Var_{slope} = .06$, $z = 1.63$, $p > .05$). We therefore restricted the analyses to the prediction of the significant variation in average relationship quality over the year ($Var_{intercept} = .24$, $z = 4.98$, $p < .01$). Importantly, however, by controlling for relationship quality at the initial testing session, our analyses assessed whether partners' help predicted an average increase in relationship quality across the year over and above initial levels (also see Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009).
5. We also examined the four types of support separately. There were no central differences in associations between the behaviors in each category. The only minor difference revealed that tangible support in Study 2 was more strongly associated with partners' help (βs = .27 and .18 for men and women, respectively, $p < .05$) than informational support (βs = .19 and .15, $p = .08$).

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