A preliminary test of a relational goal pursuit theory of obsessive relational intrusion and stalking☆

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether relational goal pursuit theory (RGP) predicts post-breakup persistent unwanted pursuit of the partner. RGP posits that lower-order goals of seeking intimacy with a particular person become linked to higher-order goals, leading to a cascade of goal linking, rumination, face sensitivity, emotional flooding, and if unchecked, eventually obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) or stalking. Several model components revealed modest potential for predicting ORI. The locus of relationship breakup had substantial impact on the RGP constructs, but surprisingly little effect on the perpetration of ORI tactics. Implications for the RGP theory and the prediction of ORI perpetration are discussed.

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Obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) occurs in ongoing, interdependent, and highly involved relationships in which one person is pursuing a definition of the relationship that is distinctly and expressly dispreferred by the other (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). When this type of relationship becomes frightening or threatening, it constitutes *stalking*. Stalking represents a constellation of behaviors "characterized by repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications and/or contacts on another in a manner which could be expected to cause distress and/or fear in any reasonable person" (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2009, p. 10). Both ORI and stalking represent a type of disjunctive relationship in which one person seeks interaction with another, whereas the other expresses a preference for no relationship, or at least a different type of relationship. Most current theories of personal relationships refer to conjunctively structured relations, in which both participants are pursuing some degree of common ends. Enduring disjunctive relationships, in which the goals of the interactants are not competitive, but divergent, introduce significant theoretical challenges. This study attempts an early effort toward accounting for the pursuit of a relationship with a person who explicitly wants no such relationship.

Approximately a fifth of college students have experienced stalking, and rates of unwanted relationship pursuit that do not quite rise to the level of causing threat or fear are likely to be substantially higher (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007a, b; Spitzberg, Cupach, & Ciceraro, 2010). The average stalking case lasts about a year-and-a-half, overall 75–80% of stalking cases emerge from preexisting relationships, and half of all stalking cases represent vestiges of a previous romantic relationship (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007a, b). Meta-analyses of stalking studies (Spitzberg et al., 2010) find that college females are more likely than males to experience such unwanted pursuit. When these studies report relative proportions of victimization by sex, about 70–75% of college stalking victims are female, and close to 20–25% of victims are male (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Lyndon et al., 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007a, b; Spitzberg et al., 2010). These prevalence estimates are substantially higher than those indicated by large-scale national surveys. For example, large scale studies in the U.S. indicate that between 8% and 12% of adult females and 2% and 4% of adult males have experienced stalking (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Estimates of ORI victimization tend to be substantially higher than estimates of stalking victimization, especially when stalking estimates require that victims also experience fear (e.g., Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009; Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 2000).

ORI takes many different interactional forms (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007a, b; Spitzberg, 2002), including hyper-intimacy (i.e., exaggerated courtship activity, attempts at face-to-face and mediated contacts, etc.), surveillance and harassment (e.g., following, observing from a distance, showing up in similar places, invading property, theft of information, obtaining assistance from third-parties in the pursuit, etc.), and aggression (e.g., threats and violence). Research continues to demonstrate strong associations between self-reports of having experienced such unwanted pursuit and a host of traumatizing symptoms (Basile, Arias, Desai, & Thompson, 2004; Davis, Coker, & Sanderson, 2002; Davis, Frieze, & Maiuro, 2002; Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007). As tactical and strategic functional clusters, ORI can be understood and operationalized both as an overall continuum of intrusion and harassment, or as a pattern of separate types or forms of intrusion and harassment.

In an attempt to account for such disjunctive relationships, *relational goal pursuit theory* posits that individuals pursue relationships as a desired end state (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004, 2008; Cupach, Spitzberg, & Carson, 2000). The effort exerted to pursue a goal is commensurate with the perceived desirability of the goal and the perceived feasibility of goal attainment. Cognitive representations of goals are hierarchically organized (Martin & Tesser, 1989). Short-term goals are organized so as to assist the achievement of longer-term goals, and goals subordinate in importance are yoked to more highly prioritized goals. Goal *linking* occurs in individuals who tend to tether the attainment of lower-order goals to more abstract higher-order goals (McIntosh & Martin, 1992). When the goal of having a relationship with a particular partner is linked with higher-order goals such as happiness and self-worth, obtaining the desired relationship with this person becomes a fundamental object of goal organization. The initial goal linking involved in obsessive pursuit is exemplified by cognitive statements such as "I must have you", "I cannot be happy without you", "There is no one in the world for me but you". When such *linking* occurs, goal reorganization guides corresponding reorganizations in behavioral routines (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Cupach et al., 2000). The exaggerated desirability of the idea of obtaining intimacy with the target person intensifies the desirability of pursuing and obtaining the object of the higher-order goal. Prior studies have evidenced that relational goal linking is positively associated with persistence of relationship pursuit (Cupach, Spitzberg, Bolingbroke, & Tellitocci, 2011; Kam & Spitzberg, 2005).

If the individual interprets this reorganized goal as something that is potentially obtainable, it tends to bolster confidence and persistence toward goal pursuit. This *self-efficacy* belief mediates the extent to which goals are retained and further cognitively embedded, as opposed to goal extinction and subsequent reorganization of higher-order goals. Rejected partners who believe that reconciliation is ultimately attainable exert greater persistence of relationship pursuit (Cupach et al., 2011).

The *unwanted* feature of such relationships arises when the object of desire expresses disinterest in the relationship, which represents a form of goal frustration for the pursuer. Such goal frustration is likely to stimulate *rumination* (McIntosh & Martin, 1992), which is a process of repetitive, intrusive, persistent, and unpleasant cognitions (Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996). Rumination entails anticipated emotions and worry over the prospect of failing to achieve an important goal (Bagozzi, Baumgartner, & Pieters, 1998; Baumgartner, Pieters, & Bagozzi, 2008). Such worries are magnified when the goal is linked to higher-order goals like self-worth (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). Both the rumination and goal frustration tend to reinforce idealization of the goal (e.g., perceiving the target individual as more desirable than she or he 'objectively' is), and the ongoing failure of achieving such idealized goals creates a self-reinforcing cycle of arousal, further rumination, and

motivation (Bagozzi et al., 1998; Baumgartner et al., 2008). Rumination therefore fosters persistence of relationship pursuit (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Cupach et al., 2011).

Repeated goal frustration stimulates emotional *flooding* of negative affect (Berscheid, 1983), which is further fueled by ongoing rumination (McIntosh & Martin, 1992). General emotional distress following a relationship breakup has been correlated with persistence in seeking reconciliation (De Smet, Loeys, & Buysse, 2012; Dutton & Winstead, 2006). More specific emotions such as anger, frustration, jealousy and anger have also been associated with perpetration of stalking-like behaviors (Davis, Ace, & Andra, 2000; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000).

This flooding is expected to be sensitive to individual differences in rejection sensitivity and the rejected person's need to protect his or her *face*, i.e., the socially situated identity that one projects (Cupach & Metts, 1994). People are expected to be ego-involved in their important goals, and as such, sensitive to the implications that obstruction of such goals have on their sense of self that they hope to project to others. Failure to achieve an idealized partner may be interpreted as an implicit failure in the eyes of others. The *face sensitivity* of the rejected can reinforce the higher-order goal linkage, and evoke strong emotional reactions such as defensiveness and proprietariness (see, e.g., Hannawa & Spitzberg, 2011; Hannawa, Spitzberg, Wiering, & Teranishi, 2006). Because of the exaggerated importance of the desired relationship, the effects of rejection are magnified. Relationship rejection is the ultimate face threat because it rejects the pursuer's identity. As rumination and negative affect persist, various processes of rationalization are likely to emerge as the pursuer struggles with balancing a goal that is important yet unsatisfied. Such rationalization may deteriorate normal executive cognitive and moral reflection restraints on personal conduct. Processes of idealizing the partner, misconstruing the partner's rejection messages, and exaggerating self's ability or self-efficacy in pursuing the goal of intimacy combine to produce a cognitive, affective, and behavioral syndrome analogous to obsession (Cupach et al., 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002). Such experience of affect highlights the sense that a higher-order goal is frustrated, but self-efficacy and irrational hope fuel further efforts toward gaining the attention, and eventual capitulation, of the object of pursuit. Such a theory is conditioned on the presumption that the object of pursuit is, in fact, rejecting the trajectory proposed by the pursuer, as it is this frustration that energizes the pursuit process, and sustains the disjunctive relationship over time. The average case of stalking lasts one to two years, suggesting the durability of some underlying motivational process that is resistant to simple rejection.

Given that most romantic relationship breakups are asymmetric in which one person wants out more than the other (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998; Sprecher, 1994), the jilted person is expected to harbor some residual relational goal that is frustrated by the partner's rejection of the relationship (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Thus, goal pursuit and ORI are more likely to occur among people who are rejected than among those who do the rejecting (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Taylor, 2003; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Williams & Frieze, 2005), although some research finds that mutual breakups may not differ substantially from asymmetric breakups (Davis et al., 2000). Furthermore, the greater the *face threat* experienced by the rejected person, the more ego-involved the jilted person is likely to be, reinforcing the linkage and rumination process.

This relational goal pursuit theory has received ongoing attention and measurement development (Cupach et al., 2011; Kam & Spitzberg, 2005). Much of this research has focused on demonstrating the reliability and potential value of the measurement of the constructs relevant to the theory. The study reported here is