

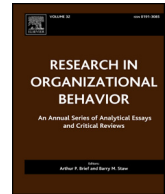


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Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory: A relational goals perspective on work teams and leadership

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ABSTRACT

Transactive Goal Dynamics (TGD) Theory is a multi-level, relational theory of goal pursuit that can be used to understand behavior within organizational teams. The theory describes the nature of goal-related interdependence (called *transactive density*) within dyads and groups, and predicts when transactive density will have positive versus negative consequences for goal-related outcomes. TGD Theory states that within many close dyads and teams, individuals' goals, pursuits, and outcomes come to affect each other in a dense network of goal-related interdependence, with the individuals possessing and pursuing goals oriented toward themselves, other members of the system, and the system as a whole. This article discusses novel implications of the theory for the understanding of organizational teams and team leadership, and constraints on relational dynamics within organizational contexts.

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Interpersonal relationships are fundamental to the functioning of organizations (Blatt, 2009; Lewin, 1947; Porter, 1996; Turner & Lawrence, 1965), driving many of the core processes in organizations, from communication to leadership to culture. Accordingly, relational processes have received a great deal of theoretical and empirical attention in many domains of organizational behavior. However, calls for more theorizing and research on the role of relationships in motivation and performance (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000) have gone largely unheeded. The vast majority of research on goal pursuit in organizations has focused on the individual level (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002), and the remainder has explored the team (Kleingeld, van Mierlo, & Arends, 2011; Martocchio & Frink, 1994) and organizational levels (Cyert & March, 1963; Ethiraj & Leventhal, 2009; Lant, 1992; March & Simon, 1958; Sitkin, See, Miller, Lawless, & Carton, 2011). Recent multi-level models of goal pursuit and motivation that examine team, individual, and organization levels have generated important new insights and pointed to the utility of a multilevel perspective (Chen, Kanfer, DeShon, Mathieu, & Kozlowski, 2009; Crown and Rosse, 1995). And yet, as trends have come and gone in the decades-long study of motivation and goal pursuit in psychology and in organizational behavior, one constant has been the absence of a focus on relationships or the relational level of analysis.

To be sure, the empirical literature is rife with examples of relational findings on work motivation and performance (e.g., Mawritz, Folger, & Latham, 2014; Sue-Chan, Wood, & Latham, 2012), especially in the contexts of leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985; Druskat & Kayes, 2000; Jacobs & Singell, 1993; Latham & Marshall, 1982; Morgeson, Lindoerfer, & Loring, 2010) and mentoring (e.g., Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Orpen, 1997; Underhill, 2006). However, these findings have not led to a broader integration of the study of work relationships into the study of work motivation and goal pursuit. Instead, the work motivation literature remains largely unaffected by these diverse and interesting phenomena. For example, recent volumes overviewing the field of work motivation (e.g., Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2012; Latham, 2012), have showcased a great diversity of topics, reflecting the vibrancy of the research in this field, but there were no relational theories presented.

Does the field’s inattention to the relational level reflect the minimal role of relationships in organizational life, or is there useful knowledge to be gained about work

motivation from studying relationships (Blatt, 2009)? In this article, we will argue for the latter, illustrating what can be gained by presenting a multi-level, relational, perspective on motivation and performance in organizations. A recent psychological theory of goal pursuit, *Transactive Goal Dynamics (TGD) Theory* (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2015), focuses on how relationships *between* individuals and *within* dyads or teams affect goal setting, pursuit, and achievement. The first papers describing TGD Theory (Finkel, Fitzsimons, & vanDellen, 2016; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2015; Fitzsimons et al., 2015) primarily focused on personal dyadic relationships, and here, we turn to use the theory to provide a novel perspective on goal pursuit within the unique context of work teams and their leaders.

But first, a note about terminology: We will define the theory’s novel terms as they arise throughout the article, but here we comment on our use of terms related to teams, goals, and self-regulation. Regarding teams, we adopt the definition presented in Kozlowski and Bell (2013). A *work team* refers to two or more individuals embedded in an organizational context, who interact with each other and perform tasks relevant to the organization, who share some task interdependence and at least one common goal, and for whom there are some boundaries delineating who is in versus not in the team.

Regarding goals and self-regulation, TGD theory relies on basic definitions from the psychological literature (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bargh & Gollwitzer, 1994; Carver & Scheier, 2001; Gollwitzer, 1990; Higgins, 1987; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Locke & Latham, 1990). In line with that body of research, a *goal* is the mental representation of a desired end-state, and *goal pursuit* is the effort invested (whether behavioral or cognitive, and whether consciously guided or not) towards the advancement of some desired end-state. For example, in the team context, both taskwork and teamwork in organizational life (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001) could be conceptualized as goal pursuit in TGD Theory, when people engage in those actions as ways to further a goal. A *goal outcome* is a comparison between current and desired end-states (Carver & Scheier, 1998). It refers not only to the end-result of goal pursuit, when the goal is completely finished and the pursuer has failed or succeeded, but also to ongoing progress towards that goal.

The theory’s name includes the term “transactive” in homage to research on transactive memory processes (Austin, 2003; Hollingshead, 1998; Liang, Moreland, & Argote, 1995; Wegner, 1987), which served as a major source of inspiration for the theory. TGD Theory has

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