

Improving intimate relationships: Targeting the partner versus changing the self

Journal of Social and
Personal Relationships
28(5) 610–633

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DOI: 10.1177/0265407510388586

spr.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This research examined the consequences of targeting the self versus the partner when trying to improve intimate relationships. As predicted, when participants ($N = 160$) focused their relationship improvement attempts on changing the partner, individuals reported more negative improvement strategies, lower improvement success, and, in turn, more negative relationship evaluations. Self-focused improvement attempts and participants' own self-regulation efforts, however, were not associated with more positive relationship evaluations or improvement. Instead, individuals reported more improvement and greater relationship quality when partners were perceived to be engaging in successful self-regulation efforts. The results suggest that targeting the partner may do more harm than good despite that relationship evaluations pivot on whether the partner produces change.

Keywords

partner blame, partner regulation, relationship conflict, relationship improvement, self regulation

Most couples confront a variety of problems throughout their relationship, including conflict over amount and quality of time spent together, disputes over finances, dividing up domestic responsibilities, jealousy, and communication difficulties (Storaasli &

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Markman, 1990). When trying to improve their relationships, people can try to change aspects of the partner or aspects of the self that are contributing to relationship difficulties. Improving communication within the relationship, for example, might involve the individual trying to be more understanding in addition to trying to get the partner to be a better listener. No prior research, however, has examined whether the consequences of relationship improvement attempts depend on whether the self or the partner is targeted for change.

Recent research suggests that targeting the partner has costs. Overall, Fletcher and Simpson (2006) found that greater attempts to change the partner were associated with more negative relationship outcomes because (1) partner change efforts were typically perceived to be unsuccessful and, hence, couples became less satisfied, and (2) recipients of change attempts felt less valued and, in turn, evaluated their relationship more negatively (also see Overall & Fletcher, 2010). Thus, relationship improvement attempts that target the partner may generally be ineffective because partners react negatively and are not receptive to change. Focusing on self-change to improve the relationship may be more beneficial. This research examines whether trying to change the self versus targeting the partner leads to more positive outcomes because focusing change attempts on the partner produces more negative and less effective improvement strategies.

Targeting the partner to improve the relationship

Research examining the attributions intimates generate for relationship events provides substantial evidence that blaming the partner for relationship problems (and hence targeting the partner to produce change) will lead to poorer relationship outcomes. Attributing negative partner behavior to undesirable personality traits but writing-off positive partner behavior to unstable external factors (e.g., a rare good day) is associated with lower relationship satisfaction (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Blaming the problem on the partner is also associated with less effective problem solving, such as lower levels of support and agreement, and higher levels of criticism and withdrawal during conflict (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Pearce & Halford, 2008). Similarly, the person who desires change tends to be more demanding and critical during conflict discussions (e.g., Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

These findings suggest that blaming and targeting the partner for needed relationship improvement will produce more negative conflict resolution strategies, including being more demanding, critical and hostile. These strategies are likely to be relatively ineffective at improving the relationship because they create resistance to change in the targeted partner. For example, a bulk of research has shown that more critical and hostile communication elicits negative affect and hostility in the partner (see Gottman, 1998) as well as defensive withdrawal (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, et al., 1993; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Moreover, hostile and defensive reactions by the target produce lower immediate problem resolution (e.g., Heavey, et al., 1993; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009) as well as slower rates of partner change over time (Overall et al., 2009; Overall & Fletcher, 2010). Thus, we hypothesized that targeting relationship improvement attempts toward the partner would produce lower relationship quality

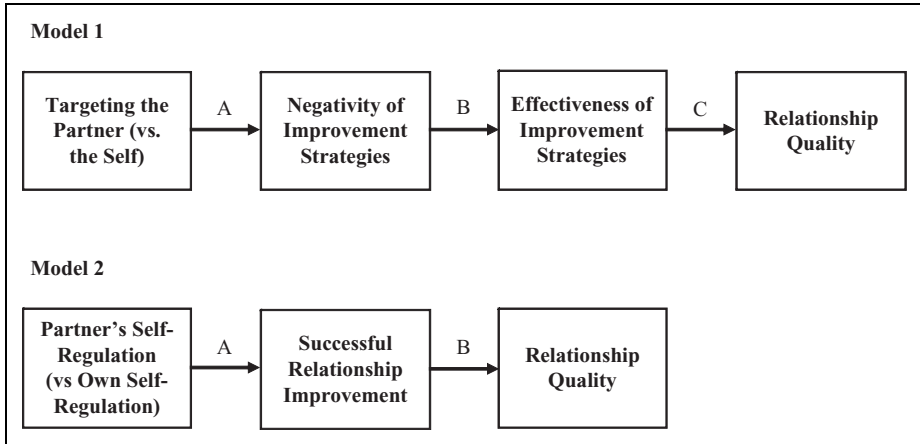


Figure 1. Hypothesized outcomes associated with targeting the partner versus the self (Model 1) and partner's self-regulation versus own self-regulation (Model 2) when trying to improve relationships.

because partner-focused attempts are (1) more negative and (2) less effective at creating improvement in the relationship.

These predictions are shown in Model 1 (see Figure 1). First, we predicted that the more intimates targeted their partner when trying to improve their relationship, the more likely they would employ negative, blaming and hostile strategies to produce change (Model 1, Path A). Second, more negative improvement strategies are likely to be less effective at producing improvement (Model 1, Path B). Third, because targeting the partner is likely to result in more negative and less effective strategies, intimates who target the partner more to produce relationship improvement are likely to evaluate their relationship more negatively (Model 1, Path C).

Targeting the self to improve the relationship

Perhaps a more beneficial strategy is to change the self in order to improve the relationship. Related research has produced mixed findings. In Overall et al. (2006) research, participants' own self-regulation efforts were not associated with relationship evaluations. Friesen, Fletcher, and Overall (2005) also found that the degree to which partners were blamed for negative relationship incidents contributed to individuals' judgments of relationship quality but levels of self blame did not. These findings indicate that how much individuals need and try to change the self to improve the relationship will have little impact on relationship evaluations.

Halford and colleagues (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 1994), in contrast, argue that the low efficacy and high relapse rates associated with traditional Behavioral Couples Therapy may be because emphasis is placed on promoting changes in the partner's behaviors. To reiterate Model 1 (Figure 1), targeting the partner is likely to produce more negative communication, be less effective, and lower relationship evaluations. In response, Halford et al. (1994) incorporate self-regulation within couple therapy, including the appraisal of

each individual's own behaviors and behavioral change goals. Positive assessments of this approach suggest that promoting self evaluation and change enhances relationship satisfaction and stability (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia, & Dyer, 2004; also see Halford, 2001).

Halford and colleagues have also developed a measure that assesses the degree to which intimates engage in self-regulation behaviors aimed at enhancing the relationship (Behavioral Self-Regulation Strategies) and intimates' persistence in improvement attempts when encountering setbacks (Behavioral Self-Regulation Effort; Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005). Research using this scale has shown that people who report greater self-regulation strategies and effort are more satisfied with their relationship, as are their partners (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007; Wilson et al., 2005).

The above results suggest that targeting the self to improve the relationship might benefit relationships. Nevertheless, no prior research has established whether targeting the self is more effective at producing improvement of specific relationship problems than focusing and targeting the partner. Referring back to Model 1 (Figure 1), we tested whether targeting the self was associated with more positive relationship evaluations. We also examined whether participants who were more self-focused in their improvement attempts engaged less negative (Path A, Model 1) and, thus, more effective (Path B, Model 1) improvement strategies.

Own self-regulation versus partner's self-regulation

Alternatively, self-focused improvement attempts might circumvent the costs associated with partner regulation, such as negative communication strategies, but yield few additional benefits. If Mary wants to improve the amount of intimacy she shares with John, she could resist working late hours and set aside time away from friends and relatives to spend with John. No matter how much Mary changes her schedule, however, if John does not also invest effort into spending more intimate moments, Mary will perceive little improvement. Instead, Mary's own improvement attempts might make John's lack of effort even more salient and dissatisfying, exacerbating perceptions of needed change. In short, the interdependent nature of intimate relationships means desired relationship outcomes depend on whether the partner co-operates and agrees to desired changes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). For this reason, we hypothesized that relationship improvement and quality would depend more on whether the partner attempts to change relevant self-attributes rather than whether the individual who desired change was engaging in self-regulation efforts (see Figure 1, Model 2). We predicted that greater self-regulation efforts and success by the partner would be associated with more successful relationship improvement (Model 2, Path A) and, in turn, greater relationship quality (Model 2, Path B). In comparison, we surmised that self-regulation attempts on their own (i.e., controlling for partner's self-regulation efforts) might yield little improvement and, therefore, have little association with relationship quality.

Current research

To assess the consequences of targeting the self versus the partner when trying to improve intimate relationships, we asked individuals to identify three aspects of their

relationship they desired to change and rate the degree to which they had attempted to improve and been successful in improving each aspect they desired to change. Individuals also reported the degree to which the self and the partner (a) needed to change, (b) had tried to change, and (c) had been successful in changing each aspect of their relationship. Participants then described how they had tried to change the most important aspect of their relationship they had desired to change. Participants' descriptions of their improvement efforts were coded according to focus—whether the self versus the partner was targeted—and valence—how negative versus positive improvement strategies were. Greater negative improvement strategies represented expressing more hostile affect, criticism, threats and demands, and expressing less affection, positive affect and constructive problem-solving.

We first examined whether relationship improvement attempts and success were associated with relationship quality. Based on prior research focusing on partner regulation (Overall et al., 2006; Overall & Fletcher, 2010), we predicted that:

- H1. Greater desires and attempts to change the relationship would be associated with more negative relationship evaluations. However, individuals would view their relationship more positively when improvement attempts were more successful.

We then tested whether the outcomes of relationship improvement attempts depended on whether improvement efforts were targeted at the partner versus the self. Based on the research and reasoning outlined above, and Model 1 shown in Figure 1, we hypothesized that:

- H2. Targeting the partner, including perceiving a greater need for the partner to change and focusing improvement attempts on the partner, would be associated with more negative improvement strategies (Model 1, Path A), less effective improvement strategies (Path B), and, therefore, more negative relationship evaluations (Path C). Thus, we tested whether (1) greater negative strategies mediated the association between targeting the partner and lower effectiveness of improvement strategies, and whether (2) both the negativity and effectiveness of improvement strategies mediated the links between targeting the partner and relationship quality. Following Model 1, we also explored whether perceiving the self as needing to change and focusing regulation efforts on the self would be associated with more positive and effective improvement strategies and more positive relationship evaluations.

Our next set of analyses focused on assessing whether perceiving relationship improvement was influenced by individual's own efforts to change self-attributes related to targeted areas of relationship change or whether successful relationship improvement depended on whether the partner successfully engaged in relevant self-regulation efforts (see Model 2). Guided by interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), we hypothesized that:

- H3. The more partners attempted to change relevant attributes and the more successful the partner's regulation efforts, the more participants would perceive improvement

in their relationship (Model 2, Path A) and, in turn, the more positively they would evaluate their relationship (Path B). Thus, we tested whether relationship improvement mediated the association between partner's self-regulation efforts and relationship quality. We also explored whether participants' own self-regulation efforts were associated with relationship improvement and, in turn, perceived relationship quality.

Across analyses testing H2 and H3 we pit the partner and self variables against each other by examining the outcomes associated with targeting the partner (H2) and partners' self-regulation efforts (H3) controlling for how much participants targeted the self (H2) and tried to change the self (H3), and vice versa. If targeting the partner leads to more negative outcomes but targeting the self does not, this would (1) indicate that the costs of relationship regulation shown in prior research are restricted to regulation efforts that focus on the partner, (2) suggest that couple therapy should employ a focus on self-change, as proposed by Halford and colleagues, and (3) highlight that theoretical and empirical approaches to examining conflict resolution should consider the role targeting the partner versus the self plays in determining the use and consequences of specific communication strategies.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via lecture, notice-board and e-mail announcements at a New Zealand university which invited people who were involved in a romantic relationship for a minimum of six months to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their thoughts, feelings and behaviour about their romantic relationship. To capture a range of ages and relationship types and move beyond university samples we also used a snowballing technique, asking participants to pass on invitations to participate to friends and family members who fit the criteria. Interested participants contacted the first author who personally handed or posted research materials to participants as well as a postage paid envelope. The resulting sample consisted of 104 females and 56 males and ranged from 18 to 71 years of age ($M = 30.58$, $SD = 12.89$, median = 24). Participants had been involved in their relationship for a mean of 7.25 years ($SD = 9.7$ years, median = 2.8 years) and the majority of the sample was married (31.3%), living with their partner (24.4%) or involved in serious relationships (26.9%).

Procedure and materials

Participants returned questionnaires via post along with their contact details (kept separate from their questionnaires) for entry into three cash draws of US\$100. After providing demographic information, participants completed the following scales.

Relationship quality

The short PRQC inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) assessed relationship quality with seven items tapping levels of satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust,

passion, love, and romance in the relationship (e.g., How intimate is your relationship?; 1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Extremely*). Averaging the items provided an overall index of relationship quality, which had good internal reliability (see Table 1).

Relationship improvement attempts

Participants were then asked to list three aspects of their relationship they desired to change or improve. For each aspect, participants rated nine items. First, participants rated how much they (1) desired change in each aspect of their relationship in the last six months (1 = *No need to change my relationship*, 7 = *Strong need to change my relationship*), (2) tried to change each aspect of their relationship in the last six months (1 = *Not tried at all to change my relationship*, 7 = *Tried hard to change my relationship*), and (3) perceived their attempts as being successful in producing improvement in the last six months (1 = *Attempts have not been successful*, 7 = *Attempts have been successful*). Ratings for each of these three items were positively correlated across the three aspects participants desired to change (ranging from .22 to .43). Thus, each item was averaged across the three targeted relationship features to produce overall levels of desired relationship improvement, improvement attempts, and improvement success. Internal reliability for these three-item measures was adequate given the shortness of the scale (Cortina, 1993; see Table 1).

Target of blame

To assess the extent to which participants perceived the self versus the partner as needing to change in order to improve the relationship, participants rated the degree to which (4) they needed to change themselves to improve each aspect of their relationship (1 = *No need to change myself*, 7 = *Strong need to change myself*) and (5) their partner needed to change something about themselves to improve each aspect of their relationship (1 = *No need to change him/herself*, 7 = *Strong need to change him/herself*). As before, ratings for self blame and partner blame were averaged across the three relationship aspects participants desired to change to produce overall levels of self blame and partner blame. Reliability of these three-item measures was adequate (see Table 1).

Self-regulation and partner's self-regulation

Participants also reported the extent to which they had (6) tried to change themselves in order to improve each aspect of their relationship in the last six months (1 = *Not tried at all to change myself*, 7 = *Tried hard to change myself*), and (7) perceived their self-regulation attempts as being successful in the last six months (1 = *Attempts have not been successful*, 7 = *Attempts have been successful*). To assess the degree to which their partner had attempted and been successful at changing relevant attributes, individuals also rated the degree to which (8) their partner had tried to change themselves in order to improve each aspect of the relationship in the last six months (1 = *Not tried at all to change him/herself*, 7 = *Tried hard to change him/herself*), and (9) their partner's self-regulation attempts had been successful in the last six months (1 = *Attempts have not*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations across relationship improvement desires, attempts, strategies and relationship quality

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
<i>Relationship improvement attempts</i>														
1. Desire to improve relationship	–													
2. Attempts to improve relationship	.57**	–												
3. Success in improving relationship	.24**	.62**	–											
<i>Target of blame</i>														
4. Partner needs to change	.17*	.14	.02	–										
5. Self needs to change	.21**	.21**	.10	–.09	–									
<i>Self-regulation</i>														
6. Self-regulation attempts	.24**	.51**	.42**	–.01	.62**	–								
7. Self-regulation success	.09	.47**	.61**	.03	.44**	.80**	–							
<i>Partner's self-regulation</i>														
8. Partner's self-regulation attempts	.08	.38**	.59**	.22**	.06	.31**	.48**	–						
9. Partner's self-regulation success	.03	.34**	.62**	–.01	.15	.36**	.51**	.78**	–					
<i>Improvement strategies</i>														
10. Negativity	.13	–.10	–.18*	.18*	–.21**	–.22**	–.24**	–.26**	–.30**	–				
11. Partner-focused strategies	–.07	–.01	–.06	.25**	–.31**	–.19*	–.16*	–.04	–.14	.33**	–			
12. Self-focused strategies	.07	.07	.02	–.26**	.44**	.26**	.14	–.11	–.06	–.36**	–.59**	–		
13. Effectiveness of strategies	–.03	.26**	.50**	–.05	.08	.34**	.46**	.42**	.46**	–.41**	.26**	.18*	–	
14. Relationship quality	–.02	.06	.31**	–.20*	.02	.10	.22**	.32**	.37**	–.25**	–.11	–.08	.37**	–
Means	5.47	4.86	3.94	4.92	4.52	4.16	3.76	3.94	3.73	2.78	3.51	3.49	4.58	5.58
SDs	.96	1.10	1.22	1.32	1.36	1.30	1.27	1.30	1.39	1.46	2.01	2.07	1.60	.84
Reliability	.63	.51	.62	.66	.59	.60	.60	.59	.69	.85	.89	.91	–	.85

Note: For all scales, reliability is indexed by Cronbach's alpha (α). For coder ratings of assessments of improvement strategies, reliability is indexed by the correlation across coder ratings. $N = 160$ except for all analyses involving ratings of improvement strategies for which $N = 156$ due to missing data of four participants. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

been successful, 7 = Attempts have been successful). Each set of ratings were positively correlated across the three relationship aspects identified as needing improvement (ranging from .30 to .40) and, thus, items were averaged across the three targeted features. Internal reliability across these three-item measures was adequate (see Table 1).

Improvement strategies

Finally, participants were asked to identify which of the three aspects they most desired to change and describe what they did to bring about change in that aspect of their relationship in the past six months. Participants were instructed to describe specifically what they had said or done and the ways in which they had behaved or interacted in their relationship in order to produce desired change. Following their written response, participants rated how effective or successful the methods they had described were in producing the desired change in their relationship (1 = Actions have not been successful, 7 = Actions have been successful). Ratings of effectiveness provided another means of assessing the success of participants' relationship improvement efforts.

Two independent coders rated participant's descriptions of their improvement strategies according to valence (positive versus negative) and focus (directed toward changing the self versus directed toward changing the partner). First, using a typology developed by Overall et al. (2009), the descriptions were rated according to how positive (1 = Not positive at all, 7 = Extremely positive) and negative (1 = Not negative at all, 7 = Extremely negative) improvement strategies were. Positive strategies included, for example, expressions of affection and positive affect (e.g., humor) and efforts to repair the problem by explaining and reasoning with the partner, compromising and searching for alternative solutions. Negative strategies included expressions of negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation, displeasure, frustration, yelling, cursing, violence), partner derogation (e.g., criticize, insult, belittle, ridicule or make fun of in a hurtful way), attempts to control the partner by using threats, bribes or demanding change, or trying to make the partner feel inferior or guilty. Levels of positive and negative strategies were strongly correlated ($r = -.68, p < .01$), and, thus, positive ratings were reversed coded and the two items were averaged to create an overall score assessing the negativity of improvement attempts.

Coders also rated participants' descriptions of their improvement strategies according to whether improvement attempts focused on changing the self versus changing the partner. Self-focused attempts captured descriptions focused on changing self attributes or behavior in order to improve the relationship (1 = Not focusing on self at all, 7 = Extremely focused on the self) as well as the overall amount of effort the individual described in changing the self (1 = No effort in changing self at all, 7 = A great deal of effort toward changing the self). These two items were highly correlated ($r = .92, p < .01$) and were averaged to index an overall measure of self-focus of improvement attempts. Similarly, the degree to which improvement attempts were partner-focused was assessed according to the extent to which participants' descriptions focused on changing partner attributes or behavior as necessary to improve the relationship feature (1 = Not focusing on partner at all, 7 = Extremely focused on partner) and reflected a low versus high degree of effort to change the partner to improve the relationship (1 = No effort in changing partner at all, 7 = A great deal of effort toward changing

the partner). These two items were highly correlated ($r = .90, p < .01$) and averaged to produce an overall index of partner-focus.

All coder ratings were strongly correlated across coders (see Table 1), and, thus, final scores were produced by averaging ratings across the two coders.

Targeted features

Finally, for descriptive purposes, the first author categorized the relationship features participants identified they would like improved. Four main categories were evident, including communicating better and managing conflict more effectively (25%), spending time together and developing common interests (24%), negative attributes of one couple member such as stubbornness and anger management (24%), and sex, intimacy and passion (11%). The remainder consisted of issues like commitment (4%), relationships with family and friends (4%), finances (3%) and specific actions, like completing more housework and being on time (5%). These features are similar to those identified in prior research assessing common problems couples face (Storaasli & Markman, 1990).¹

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations across relationship improvement desires, attempts and success, improvement strategies, and relationship quality.

Preliminary findings

We first examined whether there were any differences in the variables measured across key demographic variables. There were no differences across gender, age, relationship length or status, with two exceptions. Women reported greater attempts to change their relationship ($r = .16, p < .05$) and perceived a greater need for their partner to change ($r = .19, p < .05$) compared to men. People involved in longer relationships also perceived their improvement strategies to be less effective ($r = -.17, p < .05$). Nevertheless, we re-ran all analyses presented below controlling for these demographic variables and the effects described below were unaltered.

H1: Relationship improvement attempts and relationship quality

As shown in Table 1, individuals reported relatively strong desires and attempts to improve aspects of their relationship. Nevertheless, participants reported generally high levels of relationship quality and, unexpectedly, levels of desired change and relationship improvement attempts were not negatively associated with relationship quality (see Table 1). However, individuals evaluated their relationship more favourably when they perceived their improvement attempts had been successful ($r = .31, p < .01$) and their described improvement strategies to be effective ($r = .37, p < .01$). Thus, desiring relationship improvement may not have blanket detrimental effects but what is critical is how successful participants are in producing desired improvement. As examined next, we predicted that improvement success and relationship quality would depend on the source and target of the relationship problem.

Table 2. Regression coefficients comparing the effects of self versus partner target and focus of improvement attempts on negativity and effectiveness of improvement strategies, relationship improvement success and relationship quality

	Negativity of improvement strategies			Effectiveness of improvement strategies			Relationship quality		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Improvement strategies									
Partner-focused strategies	.19	.07	2.01*	-.23	.06	-2.41*	-.24	.04	-2.44*
Self-focused strategies	-.25	.07	-2.68*	.05	.08	0.47	-.22	.04	-2.27*
Target of blame									
Partner needs to change	.17	.09	2.23*	-.05	.10	0.57	-.20	.05	-2.51*
Self needs to change	-.20	.09	-2.54*	.08	.09	0.34	.01	.05	0.06

Note: All effects of self variables control for partner variables (and vice versa). ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

H2: Targeting the partner versus the self to improve the relationship

We hypothesized that targeting the partner to improve the relationship would be associated with more negative (Model 1, Path A) and less effective (Path B) improvement strategies and, therefore, more negative relationship evaluations (Path C). We tested this model in two ways: analyzing the degree to which participants' (1) described improvement attempts focused on the partner versus the self (focus of improvement attempts) and (2) rated the partner versus the self as needing to change (target of blame).

Focus of improvement attempts

These analyses focused on the coder ratings of how much participants' descriptions of their improvement attempts focused on the partner and focused on the self. The more partner-focused participants' improvement attempts were, the less their improvement attempts were self-focused ($r = -.59, p < .01$). To compare the outcomes associated with partner-focused versus self-focused improvement strategies while controlling for their association, we ran a series of multiple regression analyses with partner focus and self focus as simultaneous predictors of each outcome variable presented in Model 1 (Figure 1), including the negativity of participants' described improvement strategies (Model 1, Path A), participants' ratings of the effectiveness of their improvement strategies (Path B), and evaluation of relationship quality (Path C).

The resulting coefficients from these analyses are shown in the top row of Table 2. Focusing on the partner to improve the relationship was associated with more negative improvement strategies, perceiving improvement attempts as less effective, and lower relationship evaluations. More negative improvement attempts were also associated with lower ratings of strategy effectiveness ($r = -.41, p < .01$), and lower effectiveness was associated with poorer relationship quality ($r = .37, p < .01$). These links support that targeting the partner leads to lower relationship quality because partner-focused improvement attempts are more negative (Model 1, Path A) and, therefore, less effective (Path B).

To test the mediation model depicted in Model 1 we used the methods outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to assess indirect effects in multiple mediator models. Because we hypothesized a multiple-step mediator model (see Hayes, 2009) where one mediator (negativity of improvement strategies) produced the second mediator (effectiveness of strategies), we also modelled a path between negativity and effectiveness of improvement strategies (Model 1, Path B) and calculated associated indirect effects. The advantage of this approach is that each indirect effect is calculated controlling for the other potential mediator.

This analytic strategy is shown in Figure 2. Using the macros provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we estimated 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effects using bootstrapping re-sampling ($k = 5000$) procedures to account for the non-normality of sampling distribution of the indirect effects. We also present the standardized coefficients associated with each path and the comparative direct effects in parentheses (which also control for the other mediator). Finally, consistent with our general analytic approach, analyses were conducted with self-focused improvement attempts as a covariate.²

First, controlling for levels of self-focus, greater partner-focused improvement attempts were associated with more negative improvement strategies (Path A) and, in turn, strategies that participants perceived to be less effective (Path B; see top half of Figure 2). The bootstrapped estimates of the 95% CI of the indirect effect ($-.05$, $SE = .03$) did not include zero ($-.13$, $-.01$), suggesting we can be 95% confident that the indirect effect is not zero (i.e., is significant at the 5% alpha level). The direct path between partner-focused regulation and strategy effectiveness was also reduced below significance when controlling for negative strategies. These results indicate that targeting the partner is less effective because partner-focused attempts involve more negative strategies (Paths A and B; see top half of Figure 2).

Second, as illustrated in the top half of Figure 2, the last part of Model 1 (Paths B and C) was supported. Controlling for the links between partner-focused strategies and all variables in the model, more negative strategies were associated with lower relationship quality via lower strategy effectiveness. Bootstrapped estimates of the 95% CI of the indirect effect ($-.07$, $SE = .02$) did not include zero ($-.12$, $-.03$) indicating that negative strategies lead to more negative relationship evaluations because they are less effective. The direct link between negative strategies and relationship quality was also reduced to non-significance when controlling for effectiveness (see Figure 2).

Finally, the joint indirect effect testing whether negativity and effectiveness of improvement strategies mediated the links between partner-focused improvement attempts and relationship quality was significant (indirect effect = $-.05$, $SE = .02$; 95% CI = $-.10$ to $-.01$), and there was no remaining direct effect after the role of negativity and effectiveness were accounted for (see Figure 2). These results provide good evidence that partner-focused improvement attempts were linked with lower relationship quality because focusing on the partner lead to more negative, and therefore, less effective improvement strategies.

Target of blame

We next tested Model 1 (Figure 1) using participants' ratings of how much the self and the partner needed to change in order to improve targeted aspects of the relationship.

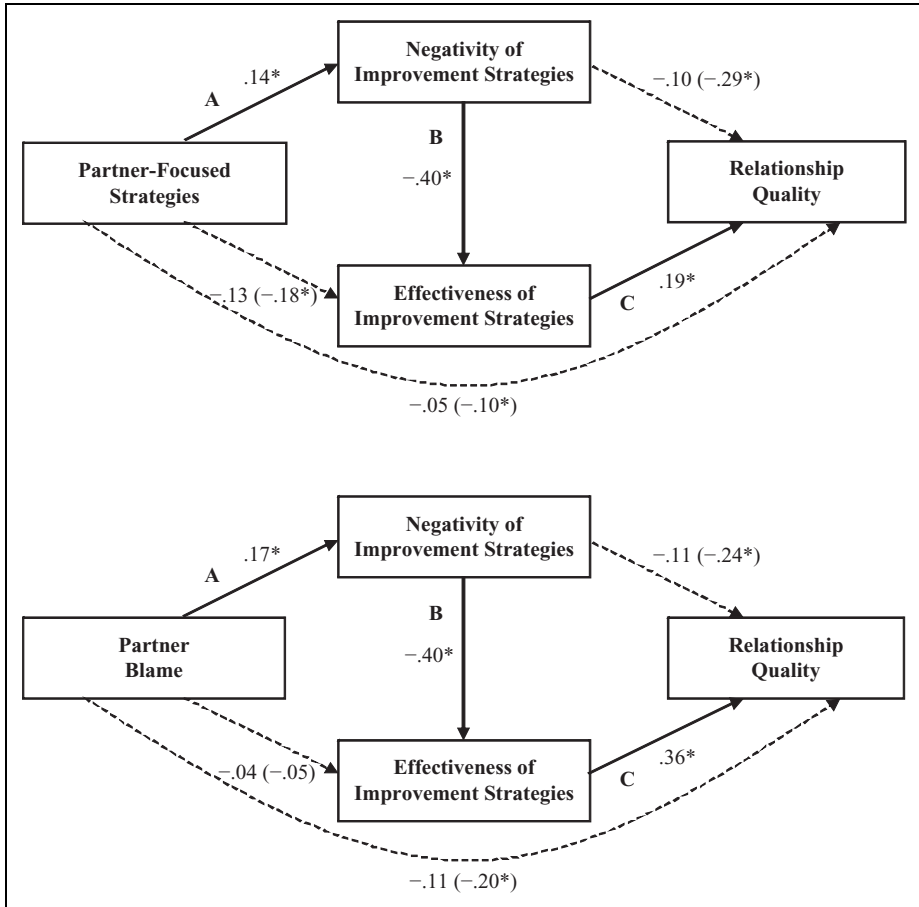


Figure 2. Mediation analyses assessing the links between focusing improvement attempts on the partner (top half of figure) and blaming the partner (bottom half of figure), the negativity and effectiveness of improvement strategies, and relationship quality. Values are standardized regression coefficients and control for levels of self-focused improvement strategies and self blame. Coefficients when mediating variables are not controlled are shown in parentheses. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

In general, participants perceived a greater need for partner change ($M = 4.92$) than self change ($M = 4.52$; $t_{(159)} = 2.57$, $p < .05$). Providing cross-validation of our measures, participants who perceived a greater need for the partner to change and a lower need for the self to change described improvement attempts that were more focused on changing the partner and less focused on changing the self (see correlations in Table 2).

Multiple regression analyses including partner blame and self blame as simultaneous predictors of each outcome variable are shown in the second row of Table 2. Perceiving a greater need for the partner to change was associated with more negative improvement strategies and lower relationship quality. We conducted the same multiple mediator analyses as above, using bootstrapped estimates of indirect effects to test whether

blaming the partner was linked with lower relationship quality via more negative and less effective strategies.

The results are shown in the bottom half of Figure 2. First, controlling for self-blame, greater partner blame was associated with more negative improvement strategies (Path A) and, in turn, strategies that participants perceived to be less effective (Path B). Although the direct path between partner blame and strategy effectiveness was not significant, the indirect effect ($-.09$, $SE = .05$) and bootstrapped estimates of the 95% CI of the indirect effect ($CI = -.20, -.01$) indicated that blaming the partner was indirectly associated with less effective improvement strategies via more negative strategies.

Second, controlling for self and partner blame, as before, negative strategies were associated with lower relationship quality via lower strategy effectiveness (*indirect effect* = $-.08$, $SE = .02$; 95% $CI = -.14, -.04$). Finally, the joint result of more negative and less effective strategies accounted for the links between greater partner blame and lower relationship quality (*indirect effect* = $-.04$, $SE = .02$; 95% $CI = -.09, -.01$; also see bottom half of Figure 2).

Summary

The results highlight that blaming and focusing efforts on changing the partner may do little to improve the relationship or boost relationship quality because targeting the partner produces more negative and less effective improvement strategies. However, although perceiving the self as needing to change and focusing on changing the self to improve the relationship was associated with less negative improvement strategies, targeting the self was *not* associated with more effective improvement attempts or greater relationship quality (see Table 2). Thus, while targeting the partner appears to be bad for relationships, targeting the self may not pay off either. Instead, improvement may depend on the partner's efforts to change—a possibility we turn to next.

H3: Own self-regulation versus partner's self-regulation efforts to improve the relationship

These analyses focused on participants' ratings of (1) the degree to which participants had tried and were successful at changing self-attributes relevant to targeted aspects of the relationship (self-regulation attempts and success), and (2) the extent to which participants' perceived their partner had tried and were successful at changing relevant self-attributes (partner's self-regulation attempts and success). Our predictions are outlined in Model 2 (Figure 1): The more participants' perceived their partners had attempted to change and were more successful in changing relevant attributes, the more participants should feel their relationship has improved (Model 2, Path A) and the more positively they should evaluate their relationship (Path B).

The zero-order correlations indicate that greater self-regulation attempts and success by participants and their partners were associated with greater relationship improvement and higher relationship quality (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, individual's own self-regulation attempts and success were correlated with reports of their

Table 3. Regression coefficients comparing the effects of own self-regulation versus partner's self-regulation attempts and success on relationship improvement success and relationship quality

	Relationship improvement success			Relationship quality		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Self-regulation attempts	-.10	.09	-1.03	-.13	.08	-1.06
Self-regulation success	.46	.10	4.38*	.14	.09	.97
Partner's self-regulation attempts	.20	.09	2.27*	.08	.08	.53
Partner's self-regulation success	.25	.08	2.62*	.29	.08	2.28*
Testing interactions between self-regulation and partner's self-regulation						
Self-regulation \times partner's self-regulation attempts	-.17	.04	-2.40*	.03	.04	.32
Self-regulation \times partner's self-regulation success	.15	.04	2.13*	.01	.04	.07

partner's regulation efforts and success ($r = .31$ and $.54$, $p < .01$) and greater attempts were inevitably more successful ($r = .80$ and $.78$, $p < .01$). According, we ran multiple regression analyses simultaneously assessing the effects of both self and partner's regulation attempts and success on each outcome variable. These results are shown in the top half of Table 3.

Controlling for participants' own efforts and success, greater perceived regulation attempts by the partner and partner's self-regulation success predicted greater relationship improvement. Partner's self-regulation success was also associated with more positive relationship evaluations. Following Model 2, therefore, we tested whether the association between partner's self-regulation attempts and success with relationship quality occurred via relationship improvement success. Using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) approach described above, we calculated the indirect effects covarying out participants' own self-regulation attempts and success.

These analyses did not support Model 2. Specifically, bootstrapped estimates of the indirect effects and associated 95% CIs suggested that partners' self-regulation attempts (*indirect effect* = .02, SE = .02; CI = -.01, .08) and partner's self-regulation success (*indirect effect* = .02, SE = .03; CI = -.01, .10) did not influence relationship quality via ratings of successful relationship improvement. Instead, the link between relationship improvement success and relationship quality became non-significant ($\beta = .14$, $p = .20$) whereas the association between partner's self-regulation success and relationship quality remained significant ($\beta = .25$, $p = .05$). Thus, although participants perceived relationship improvement when their partner was successfully making relevant changes, the partner's efforts directly contributed to more positive relationships evaluations.

Turning to participants' own self-regulation attempts and success, successful self-regulation efforts were the strongest predictor of relationship improvement. However, participants' self-regulation success was not associated with perceived relationship quality either directly (see top half of Table 3) or indirectly via relationship improvement success (*indirect effect* = .04, SE = .05; CI = -.05, .14). Thus, relationship evaluations were more dependent on the degree to which the partner was successful in attempting to change self-attributes to improve the relationship.

Interactions between participants' own self-regulation and partner's self-regulation

These results support the prediction that improvement in relationship evaluations will depend most on whether the partner is producing change. Successful self-regulation by participants, on the other hand, produces relationship improvement without the associated boost in judgments of relationship quality. However, the combination of both couple members' self-regulation efforts might also be important. For example, perhaps people perceive more improvement and greater relationship quality when both their own and their partner's self-regulation is high. We tested this by re-running the analyses described above but adding product terms to test the interaction between the participants' own self-regulation and partner's self-regulation efforts and success.

The tests of interactions are shown in the bottom section of Table 3. The significant main effects outlined above remained significant when the interaction terms were added to the model. In addition, own and partner's self-regulation efforts and success interacted to predict relationship improvement, but not relationship quality. First, *partners'* self-regulation attempts were only associated with relationship improvement when participants were engaging low (*simple slope* = .30, SE = .08, $t = 3.61$, $p < .01$) but not high (*simple slope* = .02, SE = .10, $t = .02$, $p = .98$) self-regulation efforts. This suggests that the partner's efforts do more to help the relationship when the individual is not also trying to make changes.

Second, partners' self-regulation success was more strongly associated with relationship improvement when individuals were also successful in their self-regulation efforts (*simple slope* = .37, SE = .10, $t = 3.61$, $p < .01$), with this positive association falling below significance when individuals self-regulation efforts were low (*simple slope* = .14, SE = .10, $t = 1.39$, $p = .17$). These results indicate that relationship improvement will peak when both couple members are successfully engaging in regulation efforts. However, regardless of levels of relationship improvement, it was the *partner's* successful regulation efforts that were associated with relationship evaluations.

Discussion

This research examined whether the outcomes of relationship improvement attempts depended on whether individuals focused on changing the partner versus changing the self. As predicted, the results indicated that targeting the partner for change will *not* be the most effective strategy. Instead, relationship improvement and judgments of relationship quality are likely to hinge on whether *the partner* engages in successful change attempts. The research findings leading to this conclusion are summarized and discussed below.

Targeting the partner to improve the relationship

Prior research has suggested that relationship improvement attempts tend to have a destructive impact on relationship quality, particularly when improvement attempts are unsuccessful (Overall, et al., 2006, 2009; Overall & Fletcher, 2010). These deleterious

effects, however, may be restricted to the type of improvement attempts past research has measured—those that involve trying to change intimate partners. In the present study, desiring and trying to change aspects of the relationship (as opposed to specifically attempting to change partner-attributes) did not predict lower relationship evaluations. Moreover, when participants felt they had successfully produced desired changes they evaluated their relationship more favourably. Thus, identifying a need for change and actively working on improving relationships does not inevitably lead to poor relationship outcomes.

Instead, our results suggest that the outcome of improvement attempts will depend on whether individuals target the partner for change. Consistent with the attribution literature that suggests couples tend to blame the partner for relationship problems, participants tended to perceive a greater need for partner change than self change in order to improve the relationship. Furthermore, blaming and focusing improvement attempts on the partner predicted more negative and less effective improvement strategies, and, therefore, lower relationship quality. In short, across analyses and methods, we found solid evidence that partner-directed change attempts will be ineffective at improving relationship quality.

Self-change versus partner-change

Although our results suggested that targeting the partner was uniformly bad, targeting and focusing on self-change was not unvaryingly good either. Recognizing a greater need for the self to change, employing self-focused improvement strategies, and engaging in greater self-regulation efforts were *not* associated with more effective change attempts, relationship improvement or relationship quality. The only silver lining was that more successful change of self-attributes relevant to desired relationship changes was the strongest predictor of whether relationship improvement attempts were successful. Unfortunately, however, successful self-regulation was not accompanied by more positive relationship evaluations.

Why might successful self-change that improves problematic aspects of the relationship not generate more favourable evaluations of relationship quality? The most likely explanation rests on the inevitable interdependence that exists between couples; improving relationship problems requires not just the individual's efforts but the partners as well. Any improvement to specific aspects of the relationship the individual makes is likely to feel hollow if the partner does not recognize or play a role in the change. At worst, individuals will be left feeling they are doing all the work without the crucial payoff if the partner's contribution to the problem is not modified.

Consistent with this reasoning, when partners were perceived to be trying to change and were more successful in their self-regulation attempts, individuals reported greater relationship improvement. Importantly, additional analyses suggested that it is the combination of both self and partner's successful regulation attempts that produced the greatest relationship improvement. These results highlight that both couple members need to be involved in making their relationship better. Nevertheless, only the partner's self-regulation efforts were associated with relationship quality.

First, when partners were perceived to be more successful in their self-regulation attempts, individuals evaluated their relationship more positively. Second, the results

indicated that relationship quality was directly, and most strongly, shaped by successful partner regulation attempts and not via overall judgments of relationship improvement. Thus, partner's regulation efforts have an important influence on the quality of the relationship above and beyond desired and actual improvements.

We think this is because the partner's responsiveness to individual's relationship improvement attempts conveys care and regard. An influential body of recent research has demonstrated that relationship satisfaction is heavily influenced by people's beliefs about how positively they are regarded by their partners and, thus, their partner's likely responsiveness to their needs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Importantly, perceptions of the partner's regard are inferred by the partner's behavior. For example, individuals feel more positively regarded and accepted when their partner accommodates poor behavior (Weiselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Our results add to this literature, indicating that intimates are more satisfied when they perceive their partner is making an effort to produce desired relationship changes. Such efforts likely signal partner investment, responsiveness and regard.

Theoretical and practical implications

By uniquely differentiating between targeting the partner versus changing the self, this research provides good evidence that the unintentional negative outcomes associated with efforts to improve relationships occurs when improvement attempts focus on changing the partner. Nevertheless, as described above, our analyses also indicate that relationship quality depends on the partner successfully engaging in change attempts associated with areas of desired improvement. This leaves unsatisfied intimates between a rock and a hard place. Improving the relationship depends on partner change but partner-directed improvement attempts are less effective because targeting the partner tends to produce more negative improvement strategies. Even self-change attempts that are successful at producing relationship improvement do not yield corresponding boosts in perceived relationship quality. A key to this conundrum might be balancing targeting the partner with more positive communications that express care and regard.

Some evidence supports this balance is the optimal approach. Overall et al. (2009) found that direct attempts to change the partner which involved explaining and reasoning in a positive manner were associated with immediate partner resistance but resulted in greater improvement in targeted partner attributes over the following year. Overall and Fletcher (2010) also found that partner-directed change attempts initially reduced targeted partners' felt value and acceptance regardless of whether change attempts were positive. Over time, however, more positive improvement strategies were associated with targeted partners feeling more valued and appreciated. Thus, intimates who desire relationship change need to engage direct efforts to change the partner but offset partner reactance by conveying that they care for and love their partner. Future research should test the types of positive communications that achieve this goal and the role that changing the self might play. For example, our results indicated that self-regulation efforts might boost the effectiveness of the partner's change and, thus, might also communicate important motivating information to the partner.

Finally, these results have implications for couple therapy. Consistent with Halford and colleagues' general arguments (see Halford, 2001), our combined findings suggest that targeting the partner for change will yield few benefits. Our data also suggest, however, that focusing on self change will not improve relationship quality unless both partners are investing effort. Although relationship quality hinged on the partner's successful efforts to change, the interactions between participants' own and their partner's self-regulation success also indicated that relationship improvement efforts were most successful when both the self and the partner were engaging in successful change efforts.³

This pattern (and the associated implications discussed above) suggests that expressing a desire for partner change may not be detrimental if both couple members are taught skills to (a) communicate this need positively with reassurance of regard (b) improve self-attributes that are contributing to relationship problems and (c) recognize their partner's efforts to resolve relationship issues. This type of approach may promote reciprocal self-change efforts by both partners while maintaining feelings of value and intimacy.

Nevertheless, change by the partner might not be the only route to relationship improvement. For example, Jacobson and Christensen's (1996) integrative behavioral couple therapy fosters acceptance of problems that cannot be resolved in addition to the traditional therapeutic technique focusing on behavioral change. Acceptance therapy primarily targets how partners express emotion and communicate about problems, and successfully increases positive communication patterns during and immediately post therapy (Christensen, Atkins, Berns, Wheeler, Baucom, & Simpson, 2004). Consistent with our findings, this successful approach suggests that reducing partner blame, and therefore more hostile strategies, will minimize many costs associated with partner-directed improvement attempts. Nevertheless, the current study and others (Overall et al., 2006, 2009) demonstrate that partner change has an important impact on relationship quality, and positive accepting conflict resolution strategies that are not accompanied by change could risk damaging the relationship over time by leaving problems unresolved. Thus, as we concluded above, and consistent with Jacobson and Christensen's (1996) method, the most successful approach to relationship improvement is likely to involve balancing self-regulation and acceptance of the partner's different needs and desires with the partner's equal efforts to improve the relationship.⁴

Limitations and caveats

The findings described above replicated across both participants' ratings of questionnaire items and objective coding of participants' open-ended descriptions. Thus, self-reported ratings of cognitions and behavior were reflective of the active behavioral strategies individuals described. Despite this convergence, the major limitation of this research is that we relied on self-report measures from individuals rather than couples. Thus, we could not establish whether, for example, partner's self-regulation efforts caused greater improvement and relationship quality or more positive relationship evaluations produced more favorable perceptions regarding the partner's behavior and relationship improvement. However, by controlling across self and partner variables, we ruled out the possibility that the positive impact of partner's regulation efforts was

due to projecting self attitudes and behavior onto judgments regarding the partner. In addition, we re-ran all analyses between self and partner variables, strategy effectiveness and relationship improvement controlling for relationship quality. The effects reported above were generally unaltered providing further evidence that our results are not due to global evaluative biases.

In addition, while prior research has shown evaluative biases exist, individuals also demonstrate reasonable accuracy when judging their partner's thoughts, emotions, and behavior (see Fletcher & Boyes, 2008), and when tracking changes in their relationship across time (e.g., Karney & Frye, 2002; Sprecher, 1999). Moreover, this should be particularly true when detecting behaviors that signal partner investment and trustworthiness, such as their co-operation in improving the relationship. Although we could not assess the accuracy of participants' reports regarding their partner's efforts because we did not examine couples, prior research (Overall et al., 2006, 2009) has shown that both partner-reported improvement attempts and perceptions of those attempts evidence similar associations with critical judgments, such as improvement success and relationship quality. Furthermore, Overall et al. (2006) also demonstrated, as others have (e.g., Gable, Reis, & Downey, 2003), that perceptions of partner's behavior, rather than partner's reports of the behavior, have the most powerful impact on perceived success and relationship evaluations. Thus, as our results indicate, it is when individuals perceive their partner is making successful improvement attempts that they should be more satisfied with their relationship.

Nonetheless, collecting dyadic data allows a test of partner effects, such as whether the nature and valence of partner-directed attempts influence how co-operative the partner wishes and reports they are being in terms of improving the relationship. This is an important step for future research because it provides a good test of the mechanisms that underlie the success or failure of self versus partner-directed improvement attempts. For example, does ongoing self-regulation efforts by the person who most desires relationship improvement motivate more positive co-operation in the partner and reduce the costs accompanying direct requests for partner change? Although we think this next step is important, this does not negate the importance of our findings. Returning to the above point, when comparing individual's perceptions with partner reports, there is strong existing evidence that what matters most is what intimates perceive their partner is doing. Thus, the partner's efforts need to be visible and recognized for individuals to perceive relationship improvement and it is these perceptions that will drive resulting satisfaction.

Our sampling strategy was designed to assess a range of ages and relationship types. All relationships, regardless of stage, will confront relationship difficulties and, thus, involve attempts to change the self or the partner to improve relationships. Nevertheless, the average age of participants in this research was 30 and only a third of the sample was married. Older married couples, who are more heavily invested in their relationships, might be more likely to try and change each other and use more negative strategies because of greater commitment to improving relationship problems (Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). Alternatively, older intimates in more serious relationships might employ more positive strategies to sustain intimacy and closeness, including recognizing their own role in the relationship problem and attempting to change the self. In this study,

age and relationship seriousness (i.e., dating, living together, or married) did not predict levels of partner or self-change attempts. Controlling for these variables also did not alter the consequences of targeting the self versus targeting the partner to improve the relationship.

There were also few differences across men and women, with the exception that women reported greater attempts to change their relationship and perceived a greater need for their partner to change. These findings are consistent with demand-withdraw patterns of communication which show that women tend to be more critical, blaming and demanding when discussing relationship problems (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, et al., 1993, 1995). However, men and women's demand behavior tends to be equal (e.g., Heavey et al., 1993) or reverses (e.g., Klinetob & Smith, 1996) when discussing issues the male partner raises. Although the make-up of our sample (only 35% men) might have limited our ability to detect gender differences, this is likely why men and women did not differ in their self-reported improvement behavior. Both men and women were asked to identify aspects that they desired change and, as noted before, when people are dealing with their own desired improvement, they are more likely to engage direct and demanding communication strategies.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study extends prior research by contrasting relationship improvement attempts directed toward the partner versus improvement efforts focusing on the self. The results suggest that targeting the partner may do more harm than good despite that relationship improvement and satisfaction pivots on whether the partner produces change. Highlighting the difficulties in maintaining relationships, however, successful self change is also unlikely to bring about vast improvements in relationship quality unless self-regulation efforts trigger the partner's co-operation in improving specific relationship problems. Thus, highlighting the truly interdependent nature of relationships, encouraging couples to engage in self-regulation to improve their relationships may be beneficial because the change individuals make enhances the satisfaction of their partner (and vice versa).

Conflict of interest statement

The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Each feature was also categorized according to whether the topic was specific to the partner (e.g., the partner's trust, commitment, criticism; 22%), was specific to the self (e.g., the participants' own trust or mood; 14%), or was worded as a relationship problem that was not directed toward the partner or the self (e.g., the time 'we' spend together or 'our'

- communication). When participants described strategies targeting features that were worded specific to the partner, their strategies were less self-focused and more partner-focused ($F_{(2,159)} = .29, .36, \text{ and } 28.60, p > .01$) and were rated as less effective ($F_{(2,159)} = 3.29, p > .05$). However, controlling for whether the topic focused on the partner versus the self or relationship did not alter the effects shown in Table 2 and Figure 2 and described below.
2. Note that tests based on assumptions of normal distributions (such as *Sobel's z*) cannot be calculated when using bootstrapping procedures to estimate models with covariates.
 3. We also assessed people's general tendencies to engage in behavioral self-regulation using the scale by Wilson et al. (2005). Individuals' who reported using a range of behaviors to enhance their relationship (Behavioral Self-Regulation Strategies) reported greater self-regulation attempts and success, and were less partner-focused in their improvement attempts. In contrast, the general tendency to persist in behavioral self-regulation when encountering difficulties in producing change (Behavioral Self-Regulation Effort) was associated with greater relationship improvement, more positive relationship evaluations, and more effective change attempts *by the partner*. Consistent with our arguments, this latter finding indicates that maintaining relationship improvement attempts might rub off on the partner. Controlling for general behavioral self-regulation did not alter or modify any of the results.
 4. We thank an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions with regard to these points.

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