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Personal Goals and Interpersonal Support and Hindrance as Factors in Psychological Distress and Well-Being

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Abstract

This study examined psychological distress and well-being as a function of the characteristics of personal projects and project-relevant social support and social hindrance provided by the three most important people in subjects' lives. Three project factors (Project Mastery, Strain, and Self-Involvement) were found to account for significant variation in both psychological distress and well-being. Project support was generally found to be significantly related to well-being, but not to distress. However, project hindrance was found to be significantly related to both distress and well-being. Additional analyses revealed that the behavior of the most important person in a subject's life is of special significance in accounting for variations in psychological distress and well-being. Finally, evidence of the independence of support and hindrance was observed.

Traditionally, the molar constructs of psychological distress and well-being have been linked either to broad-based social-ecological dimensions or to relatively stable organismic factors. Recently, however, several theorists have proposed models in which personal goal systems play a role in psychological functioning. For example, Little (1976, 1983; Palys & Little, 1983) has proposed a connection between well-being and the characteristics of *personal projects*, denned as "interrelated sequences of actions intended to achieve some personal goal" (Palys & Little, 1983, p. 1222). Similarly, Klinger (1975, 1977; Klinger, Barta, & Maxeiner, 1981) has suggested that experience is organized around the attainment of valued incentives and that incentive pursuit is represented by an affectively laden motivational state, or *current concern*. The characteristics of current concerns (e.g., probability of success, available time) are expected to influence the likelihood of goal attainment, and thereby to influence affect. Finally, Emmons (1986) has argued that subjective well-being is a function of the properties of a higher level motivational construct, *personal strivings*.

Although the conceptualization of goals differs across these approaches, each model emphasizes the significance for psychological functioning of the characteristics of goal systems. Several studies have provided empirical support for this relation. In a semantic differential analysis of current concerns, Ruehlman (1985) found that, relative to nondepressed subjects, depressed subjects viewed their five most important current concerns in a less positive and less active fashion. Palys and Little (1983) found that subjects who expressed high and low levels of life satisfaction were distinguished on the basis of their

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projects' importance, enjoyment, difficulty, and the degree to which others tended to be involved in project activities. Bowie-Reed (1984) examined the relations among five personal project factor scores and measures of life satisfaction, social satisfaction, and quality of life. A negative affect factor was significantly and negatively related to both social and life satisfaction, and the social meaningfulness of projects was positively associated with life satisfaction. Finally, Emmons (1986) reported that positive mood was related to the value of personal strivings as well as to the degree of past fulfillment, whereas negative mood was associated with low expectations of success, striving ambivalence, and conflict among goal strivings.

Little and his colleagues (Bowie-Reed, 1984; Palys & Little, 1983) have examined the relations among characteristics of personal projects and several measures of positive functioning, including quality of life, life satisfaction, and social satisfaction. The association between characteristics of goal systems and negative functioning has, however, been less extensively investigated, with Ruehlman (1985) examining depression and Emmons (1986) investigating negative mood. The present study extends previous work by exploring the relations among the properties of personal projects and a more general measure of psychological distress.

The study of the relations among personal goal systems and psychological functioning is important in its own right. In addition, the use of goal systems as a context for psychological functioning may further the understanding of the processes by which psychosocial variables, such as the social network, coping skills, and life stress, may influence adjustment. That is, such variables may have an impact on goal attainment and thereby influence psychological functioning.

Contemporary models of social support have emphasized the stress-buffering effects of support (e.g., Caplan, 1974; Cassel, 1974; Cobb, 1976; Gore, 1981), although some researchers have argued that support is related to functioning regardless of level of stress (e.g., Mitchell, Billings, & Moos, 1982; Turner, 1983). In the life-stress area, reviews of the literature on the impact of the social network have generally revealed significant associations between social support and psychological functioning (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kessler & McLeod, 1985; Turner, 1983).

In focusing on how networks help one cope with stress, researchers have neglected other equally important issues. First, little is known about how social networks facilitate the pursuit of positive goals. Second, there has been a striking absence of research regarding the potential effects of negative social behavior, referred to herein as *social hindrance*. Social hindrance must be distinguished from low levels of social support. Whereas low support implies low levels of positive social interactions or relationships, hindrance reflects the presence of negative, potentially hurtful interactions or relationships.

Evidence indicates that social hindrance may exert an important, negative influence on well-being. Associations between psychological disturbance and global measures of negative social ties (e.g., number of unpleasant interactions, number of people who are sources of both support and conflict, perceived rejection) have been observed in a number of studies

(Barrera, 1981; Brown, Birley, & Wing, 1972; Henderson, Byrne et al., 1978; Henderson, Byrne, Duncan-Jones, Scott, & Adcock, 1980; Henderson, Duncan-Jones, McAuley, & Ritchie, 1978; Kaplan, Robbins, & Martin, 1983; Sandler & Barrera, 1984). For example, Fiore, Becker, and Coppel (1983) examined the behavior of the intimates of spouses of patients with Alzheimer's disease, and found ratings of upsettingness to be significantly related to depression. In an investigation with battered women, Mitchell and Hodson (1983) assessed the extent to which network members avoided victims' requests for assistance. Degree of avoidance was found to be significantly and negatively related to measures of mastery and self-esteem, and positively related to depression.

Although most measures of social hindrance entail simple, global indexes of negative social interactions, a few investigators have examined the specific content of negative social interactions. Rook (1984) defined negative social relationships in terms of invasion of privacy, being taken advantage of, having promises broken, or as sources of anger, conflict, or problems. The number of negative social relationships was more strongly and consistently inversely associated with well-being than was the number of positive relationships. Lehmann, Shinn, Allen, and Simko (1983) reported that behaviors that presented social obstacles (e.g., How often does someone you know make things more difficult for you?) were negatively related to well-being, whereas behaviors that posed social conflicts (e.g., How often do others want you to do things you don't want to do?) were found to interact with stressful life events in accounting for well-being.

Although hindrance appears to play a role in functioning, it is important to note that causal direction cannot be unambiguously inferred in the aforementioned studies. That is, although it is assumed that negative social behaviors play a causal role in functioning, it is also possible that low levels of functioning stimulate negative social responses.

The degree of effectiveness or disruptiveness of support and hindrance may depend, to a large extent, on who is performing the behaviors. Findings indicate that support from intimates (e.g., spouse, confidant) plays a more critical role in functioning than does support from distant social ties (Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris, 1975; Henderson, Byrne et al., 1978; Husaini, Neff, Newbrough, & Moore, 1982; O'Hara, Rehm, & Campbell, 1983; Paykel, Emms, Fletcher, & Rassaby, 1980). Although numerous investigators have assessed the relative significance of support from close ties versus more distant ties, little is known about the relative importance of close ties. Similarly, little attention has been given to an assessment of the relative importance of social hindrance from close ties. The significance of negative interactions with intimates is revealed in a study by Abbey, Abramis, and Caplan (1985), in which social conflict with the person one is closest to was found to be positively correlated with anxiety and depression and inversely related to quality of life. Although Abbey and her colleagues also assessed the relations between functioning and conflict with two other, more distant social ties, these ratings were made by different groups of subjects, making an assessment of the relative significance of conflict from different types of ties difficult.

Present Research

In summary, the properties of goal systems seem to be important correlates of psychological functioning, and personal goals may serve as a context for the study of the psychological impact of positive and negative social behavior. The present investigation examined variations in levels of psychological distress and well-being in college students as a function of (a) the characteristics of personal projects, and (b) project-based social support and hindrance provided by the three most important people in subjects' lives.

The primary goals of the present study were to (a) extend Little's (1983) work with personal projects analysis to include assessment of the relations among project properties and distress, and (b) examine the psychological significance of support and hindrance within the personally meaningful context of personal projects. In addition, we were interested in whether social hindrance provides information regarding psychological functioning that is independent of that provided by knowledge of social support.

Finally, we wished to examine the extent to which the most, second most, and third most important people in subjects' lives accounted for unique portions of the variance in well-being and distress. Although it is clear from past research that close social ties tend to play a more important role in functioning than do more distant ties, the relative importance of the actions of individuals within the category of close ties remains unexplored. It may be that, similar to research demonstrating the special value of a single confidant (e.g., Brown et al., 1975), psychological functioning is affected mainly by the support and hindrance of the most important person. Alternatively, the social behaviors of each of these three individuals may contribute significantly to psychological functioning. This fine-grained examination of the differential significance of these three individuals provides information with both theoretical and applied implications. Exploration of this issue increases our understanding of the role that close network members play in functioning. Second, given the increased interest in using support networks to facilitate well-being (e.g., Gottlieb, 1985), the current study may help define an appropriate scope for support-based interventions.

To assess whether the most important person was of greatest empirical significance, we examined whether, after accounting for variation in well-being and distress due to the actions of the most important person, additional significant variance was accounted for by support and hindrance from the second most important person. Finally, we assessed whether the actions of the third most important person accounted for further significant variation in well-being and distress, above that accounted for by the actions of the most and second most important people.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 229 undergraduates (153 women, 76 men) enrolled in introductory psychology courses. All subjects received course credit for their participation. Ninety-two percent of the subjects were single. The average age was 19.8 years ($SD = 2.75$).

Measures

Mental Health Inventory (MHI).—The MHI (Veit & Ware, 1983) is a 38-item measure of psychological distress and well-being. The factor structure of the instrument was tested (using both exploratory and confirmatory techniques) in four samples (total $N = 5,089$; Veit & Ware, 1983). A stable hierarchical factor structure was revealed. Two correlated factors ($r = -.75$), Psychological Well-Being and Distress, provide information on positive and negative psychological functioning. Alpha coefficients of .94 and .92 and 1-year test-retest correlations of .62 and .63 have been found for the Distress and Well-Being scales, respectively (Veit & Ware, 1983). Scores on the MHI have been found to be related to stressful life events, social support, history of emotional difficulties, physical illness, general health perceptions, life satisfaction, and the use of general and mental health services (Manning, Newhouse, & Ware, 1982; Ware, Davies-Avery, & Brook, 1980; Ware, Johnston, Davies-Avery, & Brook, 1979; Ware, Manning, Duan, Wells, & Newhouse, 1984; Williams, Ware, & Donald, 1981).

Personal projects inventory.—The personal projects inventory is a modification of Little's (1983) instrument. The present inventory required subjects to rate their 4 most important projects (of the previous month) along 17 dimensions: importance, enjoyment, difficulty, visibility to others, control, initiation, stress, time adequacy, outcome, self-identity, others' view of the importance of the project, value congruency, positive impact of the project on other projects, negative impact of the project on other projects, progress, challenge, and absorption. These projects were rated on a 0 (*not at all important*) to 10 (*very important*) scale. The present instrument represents a slight modification of Little's inventory in that subjects rated only their 4 most important projects (in contrast to Little's 10 projects). In addition, the wording of the ratings scales was changed to the past tense in order to reflect perceptions of projects over the previous month. Test-retest data are available on earlier versions of the personal projects procedure. Morrison (1979) reported 9- to 14-day test-retest reliabilities ranging from .28 to .69 (with an average reliability of .50), and Palys (1979) observed 7-day reliabilities ranging from .51 to .66. Given the transience of specific personal goals, these data are not surprising.

Social support and hindrance inventory.—Support and hindrance of personal projects were assessed with a 20-item scale that included 10 positive (e.g., seemed pleased with my progress on the project, helped me to think about different ways to achieve my goal on the project, showed that he [or she] thought I was doing a good job) and 10 negative (e.g., gave misleading advice or information, tried to help me with the project and made mistakes, made me feel worse when I felt discouraged about the project) project-relevant behaviors (Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1987).[1] A 0- (*not at all descriptive*) to 6- (*extremely descriptive)* point scale was used. Ruehlman and Wolchik (1987) found that principal-axis factoring, with varimax rotation, yielded a two-factor solution (Support and Hindrance) that accounted for 42.64% of the variance. The loadings of the 10 support items on the Support factor ranged from .49 to .79, whereas the loadings of the 10 hindrance items on the Hindrance factor ranged from .45 to .74. The loadings of support items on the Hindrance factor and of

[1]Copies of the support and hindrance inventory may be obtained from Linda S. Ruehlman.

hindrance items on the Support factor ranged from −.27 to .11. Alpha coefficients for the Support and Hindrance scales were found to be .88 and .85, respectively, and two-day test-retest reliabilities ranged from .85 to .93.

The subscales were found to possess adequate convergent and discriminant validity (Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1987). Ratings of project support were moderately correlated with scores on the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981) and with scores on the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Ratings of project hindrance were nonsignificantly related to scores on the ISSB and ISEL.

Procedure

Groups of approximately 35 respondents completed the MHI. Next, the personal projects concept was explained as follows:

> We are interested in studying the kinds of goals or objectives that people have at different stages in their life and the way in which people think about their goals. We refer to these nontrivial goals as *personal projects*. Personal projects can be defined as organized undertakings in pursuit of some valued goal(s) or outcome(s). Projects can vary in their complexity, length of time needed to achieve the goal, their importance, how well worked out they are, whether they are done alone or with others, etc. All of us have a number of personal projects at any given time which we think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete.

Examples of projects were provided (e.g., finding a job, losing 15 pounds, studying for an exam), and subjects then listed all of their projects of the previous month, identified their four most important projects, and rated (in random order) each of their four most important projects along 17 dimensions. Next, subjects listed

> all of the adults who currently have an impact on your life. They may be people you see frequently or infrequently, they may be family or nonfamily, those you care about and/or who care about you, people you are close to, those who have some power or control over you, people you like or dislike, etc.

Subjects then were asked to “Carefully read over your list of important people. Choose the three people who are most important to you. Next, rank them in order of their importance to you.” Finally, respondents rated how well the list of 20 support and hindrance items described the behavior of each of their three most important people in relation to each of their four most important projects over the past month. Thus, 12(3 people × 4 projects) sets of support and hindrance ratings were carried out (e.g., support and hindrance provided by the most important person in relation to Project 1, in relation to Project 2, etc.). To control for possible order effects, ratings of the support and hindrance provided by the three most important people were randomly ordered within a random order of the four most important projects. Despite the large number of ratings, subjects’ ratings of support and hindrance appear to be reliable, as indicated by the test-retest reliabilities discussed earlier.

Results

Data Reduction

Project dimensions.—For each of the 17 project dimensions, a mean was calculated by averaging across the four projects. To reduce the number of project dimensions, principal-axis factoring with varimax rotation was carried out. This procedure revealed three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (4.23, 1.99, and 1.04). The three factors accounted for 43% of the variance. The rotated loadings are presented in Table 1.

The first factor was deemed to reflect project mastery, with greater mastery being associated with making progress toward an absorbing, relatively enjoyable, and controllable goal for which the person has adequate time and expects a positive outcome. The second factor was labeled Project Strain. Greater project strain was primarily associated with greater project difficulty, stress, and challenge, and to a lesser degree with absorbing projects that have a negative impact on other projects. Finally, the third factor was interpreted as a Self-Involvement factor, with greater involvement associated with controllable, self-initiated projects that are consistent with one's self-view (value, self-identity).

Support and hindrance.—A breakdown of the identities of the three most important people is provided in Table 2. Family members were 72%, 77%, and 48% of the most important, second most important, and third most important targets, respectively.[2]

The mean levels of support and hindrance provided by each of the three most important people were computed by averaging ratings across projects. Subjects tended to report moderate levels of support (*M*s = 40.12, 35.91, and 34.19 for the most, second most, and third most important person, respectively), and low levels of hindrance (*M*s = 7.70, 6.20, and 5.47 for the most, second most, and third most important person, respectively).[3] Alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the six measures. The coefficients for support from the most, second most, and third most important persons were .87, .86, and .88, respectively. The alpha coefficients corresponding to the measures of hindrance from the most, second most, and third most important person were .88, .89, and .89.

Zero-Order Correlations

The simple correlations among project factor scores, measures of support and hindrance, and psychological well-being and distress are presented in Table 3. Project factor scores are not significantly interrelated (due to an orthogonal rotation).

[2]It is possible that the most important people in college students' lives are not necessarily involved in or aware of their projects. To examine this issue, subjects also identified for each of their four most important projects, the person "who has the greatest impact on the success or failure of the project." The targets selected by subjects were generally one of their three most important people; 83.4% of the targets selected for the most important project, 78.6% of the targets for Project 2, 76.9% for Project 3, and 73.8% for Project 4 had been mentioned as one of the three most important people. Thus, the three most important people in subjects' lives appear to be generally involved in subjects' projects. In addition, subjects believed that their three most important people were quite knowledgeable about their four most important projects with the mean ratings of knowledge about the projects ranging from 3.57 to 5.03 (on a 0- to 6-point scale).

[3]Lower hindrance ratings, relative to support, are perhaps not surprising given the network members who were rated (the three most important people). However, due to the number of zero ratings (ranging from 20.5% to 36.8%), the current reliabilities may be higher than those based on an assessment of hindrance from more distant ties.

Ratings of support tend to be highly intercorrelated (*r*s ranging from .52 to .69), as do ratings of hindrance (*r*s ranging from .62 to .69). However, support ratings are weakly related to hindrance ratings (*r*s ranging from 0 to .16).

Although 12 of the 18 correlations among the measures of support and hindrance and project factor scores were significant, the associations tend to be weak (significant *r*s ranging from .13 to .21). Greater mastery is significantly associated with greater support from the most important person and lower levels of hindrance from the most and second most important people. Although project strain was not significantly associated with support, positive associations between the measures of hindrance and strain were observed. Finally, involvement was found to be positively related to support and inversely correlated with hindrance.

The simple correlations among project factor scores and psychological well-being and distress indicate that greater levels of well-being are associated with greater mastery, lower project strain, and greater self-involvement (*r*s = .35, −.18, and .34). Distress was found to be inversely and significantly related to mastery ($r = -.30$) and self-involvement ($r = -.33$), and positively and significantly correlated with project strain ($r = .23$).

Support and well-being are significantly correlated (*r*s = .29, .15, and .17), whereas distress was significantly related only to most important person support ($r = -.13$). Hindrance was found to be inversely related to well-being (*r*s = −.19, −.19, and −.15) and positively associated with distress (*r*s = .28, .25, and .20).

Regression of Psychological Well-Being on Project Factor Scores, Support, and Hindrance

Given the preponderance of women to men in the sample, two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine whether there were gender differences in the pattern of relations among the study variables and psychological well-being and distress. Well-being was the criterion in the first analysis; distress was the criterion in the second. In both analyses, the three project factor scores, three support scores, and three hindrance scores were entered into the equation as a block. Next, subject's gender was dummy coded and entered into the equation. Finally, scores on each of the variables in the first block were multiplied by subject's gender, and the block of product terms was entered into the equation. If the block of interaction terms was significant, it would indicate that the slopes for at least one variable differed by subject's gender. The block of interaction terms did not account for a significant gain in R^2 in either analysis. Thus, separate analyses were not conducted for men and women.

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to examine the relations among well-being and project factor scores, support scores, and hindrance scores. Because projects provided the context for support and hindrance, the three (orthogonal) project factor scores (Project Mastery, Project Strain, and Self-Involvement) were each entered into the equation first. Support and hindrance scores were entered next as *person blocks*. That is, support from the most important person (Person 1) was entered first, followed by hindrance from Person 1, support from the second most important person (Person 2), hindrance from Person 2, support from Person 3, and hindrance from Person 3. This order of entry was used to assess the

relative empirical significance of social behaviors performed by each of the three most important people in subjects' lives. In other words, after accounting for variation in well-being due to support and hindrance provided by the most important person, can additional variation be explained by examining the support and hindrance provided by less salient significant others? This order of entry also permitted an examination of the important question of whether hindrance accounts for variation in well-being above and beyond variation accounted for by support. The results are shown in Table 4.

Project factors together accounted for 25% of the variance in psychological well-being. Each of the factors accounted for a significant and unique proportion of the variance in well-being. Mastery accounted for 12%, involvement for 10%, and strain for 3%. After project factors were forced into the equation, only support from the most important person yielded a significant increment (4%) in explained variance.

Regression of Psychological Distress on Project Factor Scores, Support, and Hindrance

A second hierarchical regression analysis was performed in which level of distress was the criterion. The order of entry of variables was the same as the order described earlier. The results are displayed in Table 5. Project factors explained 23% of the variance in distress, with mastery accounting for 9%, self-involvement for 9%, and strain for 5%. The only subsequent significant increase in variance accounted for was produced by the entry of hindrance from the most important person (3%).[4]

Discussion

Project Structure and Psychological Functioning

The students in the present study construed the pursuit of important goals along the dimensions of project mastery, strain, and self-involvement. As a block, project factor scores accounted for 25% of the variance in well-being and 23% of the variance in distress. Project characteristics are an important correlate of not only psychological well-being, as previously demonstrated by Palys and Little (1983) and Bowie-Reed (1984), but also of distress.

How can the relations among project factors and psychological functioning be explained? Project Mastery may enhance more general feelings of competence, whereas Project Strain may pose a threat to self-esteem, and thereby have an impact on psychological state. Alternatively, Project Mastery and Project Strain may affect psychological functioning because of their relation to expectations about the likelihood of goal attainment (Emmons, 1986; Klinger, 1977). That is, perceptions of mastery (e.g., progress toward the goal, adequate time, feelings of control, etc.), may indicate that goal attainment is likely, whereas strain (e.g., high difficulty, stress, and challenge) may be suggestive of failure. When success seems more likely (e.g., under conditions of high mastery and low strain), the individual may experience greater well-being and reduced distress.

[4]Because of multicollinearity, it is perhaps not surprising that little was gained after entering support and hindrance from a single source (the most important person). However, in additional analyses, project factor scores were forced into the equation and support and hindrance scores entered in a stepwise manner. In the equation predicting well-being, only support provided by the most important person entered into the equation. When distress was the criterion, only hindrance from the most important person entered the equation.

The third factor, Self-Involvement, was found to be positively related to well-being and inversely related to distress. This relation may be explained by Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) theory of symbolic self-completion. Symbolic self-completion refers to a state of certainty regarding the self achieved through repeated experience with self-defining activities. Similarly, Swann and Read (1981a, 1981b) suggested that people seek information that confirms their self-concept, even if such information supports a negative self-view. Thus, the pursuit of self-knowledge may be reinforcing in and of itself. Self-involving projects might also possess other rewarding properties. For example, they may be more interesting, more familiar, or more pleasurable because they emerge from one's own interests. Also, self-involving projects may provide greater opportunities for meaningful challenge.

It is possible that project ratings reflect personality dispositions. That is, people may choose projects that are consistent with their personalities, or their ratings may mirror personality characteristics. For example, individuals who are highly motivated to avoid failure may consistently choose easy projects. Depressed individuals may provide negativistic project ratings.

Project Support and Psychological Functioning

The positive correlations between measures of project support and psychological well-being are consistent with findings reported by Palys and Little (1983) and Bowie-Reed (1984). Palys and Little (1983) found that support in the form of project involvement was related to life satisfaction. Bowie-Reed (1984) observed significant associations between a measure of the quality of project assistance and measures of social satisfaction, life satisfaction, and quality of life.

How might project support relate to well-being? One obvious explanation involves the facilitation of project-relevant tasks. In addition, encouragement and reinforcement from significant others may suggest to individuals that their projects are worthwhile, or may enhance motivation and thereby increase the probability that projects will be completed.

Except for a weak but significant correlation (−.13) between distress and support provided by the most important person, project support was nonsignificantly related to distress. Although a few researchers have observed a significant association between enacted support and distress (Barrera, 1981; Barrera & Ainlay, 1984; Lefcourt, Martin, & Saleh, Study 2, 1984), numerous investigators have reported findings similar to the current data (Barrera & Balls, 1981; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen, McGowan, Fooskas, & Rose, 1984; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1987; Sandler & Barrera, 1984).[5]

Project Hindrance and Psychological Functioning

The significant inverse correlations among measures of project hindrance and well-being are consistent with the findings of Rook (1984) and Mitchell and Hodson (1983). A number of

[5]To test for a possible interaction between support and project stress, the three support scores and subjects' ratings of the average stressfulness of their projects were regressed onto level of psychological distress. In a second step, the Support × Stress product terms were entered into the equation. The increment in R^2 associated with the block of interaction terms was nonsignificant.

investigations have yielded positive associations between global measures of negative social behavior and psychological distress (Barrera, 1981; Fiore et al., 1983; Henderson, Byrne, et al., 1978; Henderson et al., 1980; Kaplan et al., 1983; Lehmann et al., 1983; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Sandler & Barrera, 1984). In the present study, distress was significantly positively related to a measure of hindrance that was based on specific, project-relevant behaviors.

Level of hindrance seems to play a role in functioning. It may, for example, serve generally as a source of stress (Fontana, Dowds, Marcus, & Eisenstadt, 1980), thereby increasing distress. Or if hindrance disrupts project tasks, it may have an impact on functioning by posing a threat to goal attainment. Finally, hindrance from significant others may be distressing because it threatens people's perceptions of being loved and valued.

The present measure of hindrance is different from past assessment tools in several important ways. First, in contrast to other measures that assess general (e.g., nonsituation-specific) conflict or social problems, the present measure assesses hindrance in a personally relevant context (e.g., the four most important projects). Second, unlike numerous other measures (e.g., conflicted network size), the present measure is based on multiple items. Finally, by focusing on the three most important people, as opposed to the entire social network, more information about the special significance of specific network members can be gained. It should not necessarily be assumed, however, that the impact of hindrance from intimate versus distant ties will parallel findings on the impact of support from intimate versus distant social connections (e.g., Brown et al., 1975). The question of the relative importance of hindrance from close ties versus distant ties needs to be explored.

Project support and hindrance occur within the framework of perceptions of project characteristics (e.g., difficulty, importance). Our discussion did not consider the effects of support and hindrance after controlling for project characteristics. Although the effects were small, after accounting for project factor scores, social support was found to account for additional variance in well-being, whereas hindrance was found to be positively related to distress. Thus, the importance of support and hindrance to psychological functioning is contingent on which affective system (well-being or distress) is being assessed. Evidence of the unique contributions of positive and negative social behavior to psychological functioning has been observed in several other studies (e.g., Fiore et al., 1983; Lehmann et al., 1983; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Rook, 1984).

Independence of Support and Hindrance

The present findings suggest that support and hindrance are relatively independent dimensions, rather than opposite ends of a continuum. The intercorrelations among the measures of support and hindrance were either nonsignificant or weak, and as previously noted, these variables are differentially related to the project factor scores, well-being, and distress. These data suggest that a more comprehensive view of an individual's social world may be gained by assessing both positive and negative behaviors of significant others.

Significance of the Most Important Person

The empirical significance of the positive and negative behavior of the most important person was established in the present study. Once social support and hindrance provided by the most important person were considered, no significant gains were achieved by the subsequent consideration of the behaviors of the second and third most important people. Although differences between intimate and nonintimate social ties have been observed in other studies (e.g., Brown et al., 1975; Henderson, Byrne, et al., 1978; Paykel et al., 1980), the present data suggest that people make even finer distinctions within the category of intimate ties, assigning greater weight to the most important person. Given the special significance of the most important person, theories of the psychological impact of the social network may benefit from a greater focus on characteristics of these intimate relationships, such as role expectations, and the stability, style, and frequency of interaction. Greater emphasis on the type and extent of the most important person's involvement in goal-related activities would be particularly valuable.

Future Directions

The present findings underscore the significance of motivational structure (characteristics of personal projects) to psychological outcomes and emphasize the importance of considering both positive and negative social behavior within the context of goal properties. Of course, although it is tempting and often convenient to discuss correlational findings in causal terms, caution must be exercised regarding assumptions of causality. Further research is needed to clarify the causal structure among psychological functioning, project factors, support, and hindrance.

Other directions for future research include inquiries into such factors as the relation between project selection and knowledge of the availability of social resources. Patterns of project involvement might also be examined as a function of project type and social role (e.g., worker, spouse, parent). The nature of support and hindrance in association with group projects (e.g., family or work projects) may also be a subject worthy of attention. Finally, research is needed to explore the significance of personality variables to such factors as project selection, patterns of project pursuit, and styles of seeking project assistance.

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Table 1

Principal-Axis Factoring of Project Dimensions With Varimax Rotation

	Rotated factor loadings		
Project dimensions	**I**	**II**	**III**
Progress	.74	−.09	.17
Time	.65	−.09	.01
Absorption	.58	.34	.01
Outcome	.52	−.17	.35
Control	.46	−.17	.44
Enjoyment	.39	−.21	.23
Difficulty	−.21	.76	−.04
Stress	−.21	.67	−.07
Challenge	.16	.61	.09
Negative impact	−.19	.32	−11
Value	−.01	.00	.69
Self-identity	.21	−.07	.68
Initiation	.08	.10	.47
Positive impact	.28	.03	.25
Importance	.23	.23	.03
Others' view	.17	.06	.17
Visibility	.15	.08	.25

Note. $N = 229$.

Table 2

Identities of the Three Most Important People

Relationship	Most uimportant person	Second most important person	Third most important person
Mother			
n	100	74	28
%	43.7	32.3	12.2
Father			
n	47	78	23
%	20.5	34,1	10.0
Sibling			
n	6	13	29
%	2.6	5.7	12.6
Grandparent			
n	2	4	12
%	0.8	1.8	5.3
Spouse			
n	9	1	0
%	3.9	0.4	
Other family			
n	0	6	17
%		2.4	7.3
Boyfriend/girlfriend			
n	41	20	24
%	17.9	8.7	10.5
Friend			
n	20	22	71
%	8.7	9.6	31.0
Teacher			
n	0	1	6
%		0.4	2.6
Boss			
n	0	3	4
%		1.3	1.7
Other			
n	1	5	12
%	0.4	2.1	5.1
Missing			
n	3	2	3
%	1.3	0.9	1.3

Note. $N = 229$.

Table 3

Intercorrelations Among Well-Being, Distress, Project Factors, and Measures of Support and Hindrance

Variables	I	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Well–Being	—									
2. Distress	−.54***	—								
3. Mastery	.35***	−.30***	—							
4. Strain	−.18**	.23***	−.04	—						
5. Self–Involvement	34**	−.33***	.07	−.03	—					
6. Support Person 1	.29***	−.13*	.21**	.11	.17**	—				
7. Support Person 2	.15*	−.02	.10	.08	.16*	.61***	—			
8. Support Person 3	.17**	−.06	.06	.04	.14*	.52***	.69***	—		
9. Hindrance Person 1	−.19**	.28***	−.14*	.13*	−.14*	.00	.09	.11	—	
10. Hindrance Person 2	−.19**	.25***	−.14*	.18**	−.20**	.11	.11	.16*	.66***	—
11. Hindrance Person 3	−.15*	.20**	−.12	.17**	−.18**	.15*	.15*	.06	.62***	.66***

Note. $N = 229$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression of Well-Being on Project Factors, Support, and Hindrance

Variable	Cumulative R^2	F^a	R^2 change	F change
Mastery	.12	32.35***		
Strain	.15	20.50***	.03	7.69**
Involvement	.25	25.12***	.10	29.23***
Support Person t	.29	22.67***	.04	11.74***
Hindrance Person 1	.29	18.75***	.00	2.48
Support Person 2	.29	15.61***	.00	0.20
Hindrance Person 2	.30	13.46***	.01	0.70
Support Person 3	.30	11.92***	.00	1.10
Hindrance Person 3	.30	10.55***	.00	0.02

Note. $N = 229$.

[a]Represents F test of cumulative R^2.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression of Distress on Project Factors, Support, and Hindrance

Variable	Cumulative R^2	F^a	R^2 chanae	F chance
Mastery	.09	21.93***		
Strain	.14	17.71***	.05	12.40***
Involvement	.23	22.29***	.09	27.32***
Support Person 1	.23	16.86***	.00	0.66
Hindrance Person 1	.26	15.77***	.03	9.00**
Support Person 2	.27	13.38***	.01	1.32
Hindrance Person 2	.27	11.47***	.00	0.31
Support Person 3	.27	10.13***	.00	0.80
Hindrance Person 3	.27	9.06***	.00	0.61

Note. $N = 229$.

[a]Represents F test of cumulative R^2.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.