Motivation in a Social Context: Coordinating Personal and Shared Goal Pursuits With Others

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Abstract

This article reviews research on motivation in a social context. We first explore pursuit of personal goals and how information on others, as well as the presence of others, influences motivation. We next explore pursuit of group goals, including pursuit of goals alone for the self and others, and pursuit of shared goals together with others. Across these various domains, we identify coordination as the underlying principle for pursuing goals in a social context. We show that individuals’ tendency to coordinate their actions with others leads to a variety of phenomena, including conformity, divergence, shared reality, jointly maximizing choice, and highlighting versus balancing group actions. We further show that coordination increases with interpersonal closeness but is not limited to close friends.

1. INTRODUCTION

We accomplish our important life goals, as well as daily mundane tasks, in the presence of others who may help, inspire, observe, or, at times, hinder our pursuits. Indeed, our friends, colleagues, family members, and even strangers are often on our mind or are physically present as we go through our daily tasks. These individuals can influence goal pursuit by their mere presence (Bond & Titus, 1983; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Latané, 1981). Other times, they provide feedback (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, 2003; Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013; Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2012), monitor (Fishbach & Trope, 2005; Na & Paternoster, 2012; Tucker & Anders, 2001), serve as role models (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), or directly participate in goal pursuit. And naturally, these individuals can also sway us from our goals (John & Norton, 2013; Linardi & McConnell, 2011). Thus, others may encourage us to procrastinate on a task, neglect our health (eg, overeat, drink), and relax our moral standards (eg, cheat; Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Carrell, Hoekstra, & West, 2011).

Recognizing the social context in which goal pursuit takes place, we explore how people coordinate the pursuit of their personal goals as well as their shared goals with others. We define coordination rather broadly, to capture the selection of one’s actions in relation to others’ actions and outcomes, in order to achieve an overarching organization for the collective. For example, whether a person chooses to walk in the same or the opposite direction as another, we could consider her behavior as coordination to the extent that she considered the collective actions of the group. Coordination can be a response to others’ actions, evaluations, or mere presence, and does
not require that others are actively trying to influence the person. We further explore coordination in people’s pursuit of their own personal goals, goals that they share with others (eg, supporting one’s family), and goals that they share and pursue with others (ie, shared goals, such as team work). Thus, we explore coordination in making choices for the self, for the team, and with the team.

Whereas traditional research on self-regulation has focused on individuals working individually to achieve their individual goals (Higgins, 1987; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Gollwitzer, 1999; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985), more recent research has shifted focus toward exploring motivation in a social context. For example, recent research explores how people support and hinder each other’s goal pursuits (Finkel, Fitzsimons, & vanDellen, 2015; Shah, 2003). The underlying assumption in research exploring social contexts is that interpersonal closeness and, in particular, the experience of connection or “self–other overlap” matters. People’s identity is defined by their relationships with other individuals or groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Tajfel, 1972; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Indeed, as people become closer, they use the pronoun “we” instead of “(s)he and I” to refer to the self and the other in conversation (Agnew, Rusbult, van Lange, & Langston, 1998; Cialdini et al., 1976; Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, & Clark, 1991; Fiedler, Semin, & Koppetsch, 1991). The closer people are to others, the more likely they are to coordinate with others’ goal pursuit. For instance, people feel they share a part of close others’ actions and thus feel depleted by others’ efforts (Ackerman, Goldstein, Shapiro, & Bargh, 2009) or satiated by others’ goal completion (McCulloch, Fitzsimons, Chua, & Albarracín, 2011).

We propose that the principle of coordination underlies people’s goal pursuit in social contexts. We explore how coordination affects several motivational phenomena. We start with contexts in which individuals pursue their own, individual goals (Section 2). First, we look at how information on other people and their behaviors can affect the way individuals pursue their own personal goals (Section 2.1). According to the principle of coordination, we expect people to coordinate with others by adopting their preferences, yet to choose different actions. We also explore how and when people vicariously satiate on others’ actions and how they respond to role models’ actions. Second, we investigate how individuals pursue their personal goals in the mere presence of others (Section 2.2). Coordination with others leads in these cases to the establishment of a common shared reality, as people orient their representations to what they believe are others’
representation. In addition, the presence of others causes people to change their perception of their own behavior to see it as more meaningful, and to perceive support from others for their goal pursuits.

Next, we move to exploring coordination when pursuing goals for the self and others (i.e., group goals, Section 3). In Section 3.1, we explore how, in close relationships, people wish to maximize the total benefits for the group, even at the cost of uneven distribution of benefits and having some group members suffer. This effect of interpersonal closeness on maximizing total benefits further leads people to feel more comfortable with mild violations of copyrights by the in-group member than by the out-group member. Moving to situations in which people pursue goals with (instead of for) others (Section 3.2), we explore whether the way in which people construe their self and their relation to others (i.e., self-construal) influences their tendency to put more or less effort into their shared goals with others. We propose that interdependent people may work harder toward shared than toward personal goal, but the opposite is true for independent people. In addition, we explore coordination of contributions to a shared goal, showing how information on others’ existing and missing contributions influences one’s own contributions to a shared goal. We summarize our propositions in Table 1.

2. INDIVIDUALS PURSUING INDIVIDUAL GOALS

Part 1 explores the impact of the social context on pursuing personal goals. We ask how people incorporate information on others into their decisions to pursue their own goals.

2.1 Pursuing Goals With Information on Others

To the extent that information on others influences an individual’s personal goal pursuit, two opposite patterns of coordination between others and the self are possible: conformity and divergence. Conformity refers to behavioral matching; the individual pursues actions similar to others’. Divergence refers to a pattern of coordination by which a person intentionally aspires to choose different actions than others to complement what others say, do, or have.

2.1.1 Conformity

When pursuing their goals, people typically have a rich social context full of information of others’ behavior and choices. For instance, people see what
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<th>Table 1 List of propositions</th>
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**Individuals pursuing individual goals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Pursuing goals with information on others</th>
<th>1. Both conformity and divergence increase with interpersonal closeness.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. People conform to close others’ preferences and diverge from close others’ actions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. People satiate on others’ food consumption.</td>
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<td>4. Individual role models’ actions influence behavior more than group role models’ actions.</td>
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<tr>
<th>b. Pursuing goals in the presence of others</th>
<th>1. People tune their perceptions and actions to others’ expectations (“shared reality”).</th>
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<td></td>
<td>2. The mere presence of others augments the perceived impact of one’s goal actions.</td>
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<td>3. The presence of others supports goal pursuit.</td>
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**Individuals pursuing group goals**

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<tr>
<th>a. Pursuing goals for the self and others</th>
<th>1. Interpersonal closeness increases preference for jointly maximizing choices, even at the cost of greater inequality between group members.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>2. People are more tolerant of mild violations of the in-group’s (vs The out-group’s) intellectual property.</td>
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<th>b. Pursuing goals with others</th>
<th>1. Self-construal effects: Interdependence is associated with working harder in the presence of others; independence is associated with social loafing in the presence of others.</th>
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<td>2. Individuals respond to others’ completed and missing actions similarly to how they respond to their own completed and missing actions:</td>
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<td>a. Uncommitted individuals evaluate the group’s commitment and follow others’ actions; committed individuals evaluate the group’s progress and compensate for others’ lack of actions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Individuals identifying lowly with other group members evaluate the group’s goal commitment and follow others’ actions; individuals identifying highly with other members evaluate the group’s progress and compensate for others’ lack of action.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. A higher proportion of group members would respond to a message on expressing commitment (vs make progress); however, the average contribution amount would be larger in response to a message emphasizing progress (vs commitment).</td>
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others choose to study, the food other people eat, and which clothes others wear. This social context influences people’s choices (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Cohen, 2003; Fishbach, Henderson, & Koo, 2011; Latane & Darley, 1968). Research in psychology, economics, business, and public policy shows that people generally coordinate their attitudes and behavior with the information on others’ attitudes and behaviors, in a way that engenders conformity, that is, behavioral matching. In this way, people’s attitudes and behaviors are aligned and positively reinforce each other (Asch, 1956; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; Hornstein, Fisch, & Holmes, 1968; Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969; Sherif, 1936). For example, people mimic others’ food choices (Cai, Chen, & Fang, 2009; McFerran, Dahl, Fitzsimons, & Morales, 2010), environmental decisions (Allcott, 2011; Goldstein et al., 2008), and prosocial behaviors (Frey & Meier, 2004; Gerber & Rogers, 2009). Such conformity in attitudes and behavior is common not only between close others. People also conform to in-group members in larger settings, for example, those in an online community (Chen, Wang, & Xie, 2011; Salganik, Dodds, & Watts, 2006).

Why do people conform so readily to others? First of all, others’ judgments and behaviors have normative value (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Conforming to others typically provides a number of social benefits, such as social approval and social affiliation (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003), whereas lack of conformity might engender social penalties such as disapproval from others (Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). Normative conformity does not stem from an acknowledgment that others realized some truth to which the individual adheres. Instead, the individual may completely reject the idea that others are correct and nonetheless adhere to their behavior to receive some social benefits. For example, a person may adhere to the present fashion even if she or he privately rejects the notion that this year’s fashion looks better than last year’s fashion.

Aside from having normative value, others’ judgments and behaviors can also carry informational value and thereby lead to conformity. Especially in uncertain situations, others’ attitudes and behavior can inform an individual of what is appropriate or generally wise to do (eg, the wisdom of the crowd; Simmons, Nelson, Galak, & Frederick, 2011; Surowiecki, 2005). Thus, individuals believe they can improve their decisions by relying on information from others, because others presumably have information on the true value of options (Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman, 1996; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). Moreover, averaging estimates from multiple sources often improves accuracy, regardless of whether these estimates come from expert
judgments, naïve group members’ judgments, or using advice to modify personal judgments. In these cases, relying on others’ estimates and doing some sort of mental combination between judgments (including one own) improves accuracy (Larrick, Mannes, & Soll, 2011).

But whereas conformity benefits the individual by entailing social approval and by providing greater informational value, conformity is prevalent in many different decision contexts because people tend to adopt close others’ attitudes as their own. When people feel they too think like their group members, they follow group members’ lead and conform. Under these situations, the motivation to conform stems from individuals’ sense that they are united and should thus think and act as a single person. Hence, they desire to coordinate by mimicking each other.

2.1.2 Divergence
Social influence does not always take the form of conformity or behavioral matching. Rather, individuals often choose to diverge from the group’s opinions or actions, because they wish to complement what others say or do. Indeed, for groups working together, complementary behavior might often be more appropriate than having group members conform to (i.e., mimic) each other (Fiske, 2000). For example, people in a group discussion should express different positions to enrich the group discussion rather than all take the same position, and families divide household chores rather than have all members pursue the same task.

We define complementarity as a pattern of coordination whereby different people choose different actions for the greater benefit of the entire group. For example, people choose complementary actions when working on different segments of a project instead of everyone working together on all segments (i.e., the division of labor; Becker & Murphy, 1992; Sinha & Cusumano, 1991), or when mastering complementary information (Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991). For example, Wegner et al. (1991) found that individuals in close relationships better recall information than impromptu pairs comprised of strangers, because the natural pairs intuitively distribute the workload between their partner and themselves.

Whereas division of labor might be expected for group goals, people also follow similar principles in pursuit of their personal goals, where such a pattern of coordination through complementary actions seems less useful. For example, people choose to wear different clothes, buy different furniture, and order different entrées than those around them. They do so even though they are not explicitly holding a group goal of maximizing
the diversity in clothing, furniture, or foods (assuming they do not share the food). That is, even though each person is presumably only concerned with his or her own goal (e.g., to look professional wearing the appropriate attire), they coordinate with others such that they make complementary choices.

Part of the reason people choose complementary actions to others in pursuit of personal goals is that people experience others’ actions and the consequences of these actions as if they were their own. Indeed, people mentally share what close others say and do, because the self–other boundary is often less than clear-cut (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Individuals can experience others’ emotions, evaluations, and actions, as well as the consequences of these actions, as their own (Maner et al., 2002; Monin, Norton, Cooper, & Hogg, 2004). For example, people feel lonely upon seeing another person being socially excluded (i.e., vicarious ostracism; Wesselmann, Bagg, & Williams, 2009), and fall prey to others’ sunk costs (i.e., vicarious entrapment; Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). Further, people experience cognitive dissonance from others’ inconsistencies (Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003), feel depleted by others’ efforts (Ackerman et al., 2009), satiated by others’ goal completion (McCulloch et al., 2011), and experience others’ moral credentials as their own (Kouchaki, 2011). Following from these findings is our observation that people often choose complementary actions to others’ actions, because people feel that if others have acted, they have acted too.

Of course, divergence does not always reflect coordination. At other times, divergence occurs because people wish to be different. A desire to be different, or unique, has often been studied as a personality variable and important individual differences have been identified, with some individuals seeking more uniqueness than others (Brewer, 1991; Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; Schumpe & Erb, 2015; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 2012). In addition, certain situations promote more uniqueness-seeking behavior (e.g., feeling proud of one’s achievements, Huang, Dong, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014; mating motives, Griskevicius et al., 2006). A desire to be unique reflects social influence just as much as making complementary choices; however, the underlying motivation is not coordination.

2.1.3 Conforming to Preferences, Diverging From Actions
The assumption that people mentally share what others say (i.e., attitudes and preferences) and have done (i.e., action) has implications for when we should
expect coordination to result in conformity versus complementarity. Specifically, when sharing a preference or attitude, individuals adopt others’ “words” as their own and we should expect conformity, such that people express similar views to those in their immediate environment. By contrast, when sharing an action, individuals feel that they, in a way, acted too, and they are expected to diverge by choosing complementary actions. In this way, mental sharing implies that when people learn about others’ preferences, they will like the target items more, but when they learn about others’ actions, they will feel less compelled to perform the same actions “again.” This response occurs because the expression of different preferences results in (undesirable) internal inconsistency, whereas the expression of different actions results in (desirable) variety. In other words, when others’ actions are mentally shared, social influence is less likely to take the form of conformity and more likely to induce complementary decisions.

Tu and Fishbach (2015a) tested whether individuals conform less to information on others’ choices when these choices convey action, or are accompanied by action, than when these choices only convey preference (“the words-speak-louder effect”). They limited their investigation to freely chosen actions, such that an action always implied a preference (ie, no mandatory, imposed actions), and they compared a choice that reflected a preference only (eg, liking something) with a choice that reflected a preference plus action (eg, liking something and getting it too). When comparing these conditions, the researchers observed more conformity in the preference-only conditions.

For example, in one of their studies, pairs of participants evaluated chewing gum. In the preference condition, the first person of the pair chose one of two flavors of gum based on which one they liked better, without actually eating the gum. In the action condition, the first person of the pair chose the flavor of gum they wanted to taste and actually chewed it. The researchers were interested in the behavior of the second person of the pair. Pure conformity would predict the second person is likely to mimic the first person’s stated preference and his or her actual consumption by choosing the same flavor. However, if the stated preference leads to greater conformity, but the actual consumption leads to greater complementarity, the second person might conform in the preference condition but choose the other flavor in the action condition. In support of this hypothesis, the second person was less likely to conform (ie, choose the same flavor) when the first person actually tasted the gum (action condition), compared to when he or she had merely indicated a preference for a flavor (preference condition).
Another study (Tu & Fishbach, 2015a) more directly tested the assumption that people show less conformity to others’ actions than preferences because they seek complementary actions. Participants in this study were run in pairs and took turns choosing between green and a blue luggage tags that were either framed as complementing each other (ie, “these are matching colors”) or as contradicting each other (ie, “these are not matching colors”). Results showed that when the colors were said to complement each other, the majority of the participants chose the same luggage tag as their partner “indicated he or she preferred” (preference condition) but only a minority chose the same tag that their partner “chose to have” (action condition), which suggests greater conformity to preference than action. In contrast, when the colors were said to contradict each other, the authors found no effect for the first person’s choice on the participants’ choice (Fig. 1). Thus, people want to enrich their experience by choosing differently; however, if the options contradict each other, they gain little from “owning” them both, and the principles of coordination and complementary choice will not guide their behavior.

Tu and Fishbach (2015a) further provided evidence for mental sharing as the underlying cause for the words-speak-louder effect. Thus, they found people (falsely) “recall” greater past consumption of items that others have
had versus items that others have indicated they prefer. For example, upon learning that others frequently consume (vs strongly like) a specific breakfast food, participants remembered consuming this food more recently and more frequently. Moreover, people mentally share close others’ actions more than distant others’ actions; for example, people feel they share the traits of their significant others, in-group members, or those with whom they identify, more than distant others (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007; Norton et al., 2003; Smith, Coats, & Walling, 1999; Smith & Henry, 1996). Because mental sharing underlies these effects, individuals conform less to the actions than the preferences of close others (friends, in-group members), compared with distant others. With close others, people are more likely to feel they have “done” these actions too, so that these actions do not need to be repeated.

2.1.4 Implications for Vicarious Satiation
A preference for complementary actions has specific implications for food consumption, where experiencing others’ food consumption as one’s own might lead to vicarious satiation and desiring something else. Vicarious satiation occurs when—in the presence of alternative foods—a temporary reduction occurs in the desire to consume foods others eat. Research on vicarious satiation accordingly shows people coordinate their actions not only to cover more diverse experiences (as an expression of complementarity) but also because people experience satiation and feel that others’ consumption is, to some extent, their own consumption (Tu & Fishbach, 2015b).

Specifically, satiation manifests itself as a temporary reduction in desire; therefore, people postpone consuming a food item when another close person has just consumed it, as if they have just consumed it themselves. In a study that explored this possibility, Tu and Fishbach (2015b) assigned one person in a pair (participant 1) to either eat one flavor of candy and evaluate it (consumption condition) or evaluate the package design without eating (nonconsumption condition). They then gave the second participant in the pair (participant 2) both flavors to eat and observed the order in which (s)he ate them. They found that participants were less likely to first eat the flavor the other person got if the other person ate it (consumption condition) than not (nonconsumption condition).

Satiation further results in variety seeking; therefore, people choose to consume a different food than what they observed others consume, as if they have had that food too. For example, in one study (Tu & Fishbach, 2015b),
participants watched a video of a person either eating (consumption condition) or counting (nonconsumption condition) a large or a small number of M&Ms. Half of them were further asked to mimic the person by either eating or counting M&Ms. Next, everyone was offered a choice of a parting gift: (more) M&Ms or a different gift (other food or office supply). The researchers found that watching another person eat M&Ms had similar effects to actually eating them: both groups were less likely to choose M&Ms (ie, sought variety) if they ate/watched someone eat a large number of M&Ms than if they ate/watched someone eat a small number of M&Ms.

Other studies (Tu & Fishbach, 2015b) documented greater vicarious satiation for features that are directly related to sensations, such as flavor, and are therefore more satiable than features that are not related to sensations, such as brand or nutritional function (Cabanac, 1971; Inman, 2001; Johnson & Vickers, 1993). Specifically, vicarious satiation was stronger when subjects had an opportunity to choose a different flavor than what their study partner had chosen (eg, choosing between chocolate vs vanilla), compared to when they had an opportunity to choose food with a different nutritional function (eg, choosing between “high protein” vs “heart health”; Fig. 2).

Importantly, whereas vicarious satiation and physiological satiation share commonalities, physiological satiation as a result of food consumption suppresses the eating goal in almost all contexts, whereas watching another

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2** Percentage of Participant 2’s who chose the same shake as Participant 1’s, as a function of whether Participant 1’s consumed the food and whether the options on the choice set varied by flavor (satiating) or function (not satiating). Participant 2’s chose differently only when their partner’s food was satiating.
person eat in addition to satiating typically activates the goal to eat (goal contagion; Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin 2004; Stroebe, van Koeningsbruggen, Papes, & Aarts, 2013). Therefore, observing others consume food generally leads to a greater desire to eat something. However, the desire is greater for different food offerings and lower for the specific food the observed person ate. When no other food offerings are available, people desire what they watch others consume.

2.1.5 Implications for Influence of Role Models

The patterns of coordination—conformity versus divergence—further influence how people respond to role models. Typically, people admire and look up to role models for inspiration on how to follow in their footsteps (Lockwood, 2006; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). And people report feeling more optimistic and hopeful about goal attainment as a result of exposure to role models (Collins, 1996; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Van den Borne, Pruyn, & Van den Heuvel, 1987). For instance, people follow the careers of great athletes like Michael Jordan to find inspiration for their own athletic pursuits. But we are interested in whether people can feel vicarious goal completion when their role models have accomplished something, and whether people will subsequently relax their own efforts when thinking about the actions of these role models.

Role models often come in one of two forms: an individual role model (eg, Einstein) and a group of role models (eg, physics professors). Because people perceive greater overlap (Schwarz & Bless, 2007) and fuzzier boundaries (Förster, Liberman, & Kuschel, 2008) between themselves and a group than between themselves and an extreme exemplar, they might be more likely to experience the group’s (vs individual’s) actions as if they have “acted too.” The result is that people conform to an admired role model yet diverge (or conform less) from a group of admired role models.

To explore the effects of role models on individuals’ goal pursuit, participants in one study (Tu & Fishbach, 2015c) read about the health behavior of a group that many people consider role models (ie, athletes in general), or they read about the health behavior of a specific athlete (ie, the baseball player Derek Jeter). The group of athletes should allow participants to feel greater overlap of the self and the group (Aron et al., 1991) compared to a particular athlete. People might feel they do not have much in common with one particular athlete, but athletes in general should offer more room for identification and perceived overlap for people. Thus, the greater the perceived self—other overlap, the more people feel that if the others have
completed the goal, they themselves have also somewhat completed the goal and can relax their efforts. Building on this reasoning, Tu and Fishbach (2015c) measured participants’ own health-related behavior (i.e., taking unhealthy candy) after having read about the healthy behavior of a group of athletes versus one particular athlete. In line with the hypotheses, after learning about the healthy behavior of a group of role models (greater self—other overlap and thus greater vicarious goal completion), participants relaxed their own efforts on the health goal and, specifically, took more unhealthy candy, compared to those who learned about the healthy behavior of a specific athlete (i.e., exemplar).

Importantly, if people feel greater overlap with a group of role models (vs an exemplar), they should not only conform less to the group’s (vs exemplar’s) actions, but should further conform more to the group’s (vs exemplar’s) recommendation or attitude. Such a result would be consistent with the notion described above that experiencing others’ attitudes as one’s own results in conformity, yet experiencing others’ behaviors as one’s own results in divergence. Indeed, in another study, Tu and Fishbach (2015c) found greater conformity to fitness advice (attitude) from a group of Hollywood stars than the same advice from a specific Hollywood star (Brad Pitt for men, Natalie Portman for women). However, when the emphasis was on the role models’ actions, stating they were already pursuing the fitness advice, participants conformed more to the individual star than the group of stars.

Taken together, the research reviewed here suggests coordination can result in either conformity or divergence. One important variable that determines the direction of the influence is the focus on what others say versus do. Because individuals often adopt others’ views and actions as their own, they tend to conform to others’ views yet feel more liberated to pursue different actions because they did it (or ate it) too. This finding has implications for how people respond to role models.

2.2 Pursuing Goals in the Presence of Others

The previous section explored situations in which individuals pursue their personal goals with information on how others pursue their own (similar) goals. In those situations, the question was how much individuals conform versus diverge. Here, we explore coordination on a more basic level of social influence, where others are present but do not pursue any goals. The question of how the presence of others influences self-regulation is one of the oldest question in the history of social psychological research.
(Triplett, 1898), with research on social facilitation showing the presence of observers increases effort investment and improves performance (Ringelmann’s classical experiments of rope-pulling in groups versus alone in 1913, cf. Kravitz & Martin, 1986; Zajonc & Sales, 1966). Moving beyond classic research, more recent research explored how the presence of others results in the desire to establish a shared reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996), that is, sharing and communicating similar thoughts and feelings about an object or a situation. The presence of others has also been shown to influence basic human experiences (eg, tastes, Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014), as well as the perceived impact of one’s goal actions. In addition, research has explored how others (eg, friends, family members, and colleagues) support goal pursuit in situations in which they do not pursue the individual’s goals, yet they support him or her.

2.2.1 Shared Reality: Tuning to Others’ Expectations

Humans constantly try to make sense of others’ thoughts and intentions, an ability that humans share with other primates (Marticorena, Ruiz, Mukerji, Goddu, & Santos, 2011; Phillips, Barnes, Mahajan, Yamaguchi, & Santos, 2009). Other people’s thoughts and intentions are obviously highly relevant for cooperation and collaboration on common goals. But research suggests that merely thinking about other people’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions may also affect how people pursue their own personal goals. Because people feel their identities and goals overlap with other people’s identities and goals, they align their thoughts and perceptions with others to be able to establish a shared reality.

The concept of a shared reality captures the notion that humans have a fundamental drive to share their inner states with others and to establish a shared understanding of the world together with others around them (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). To create a shared reality with others, people first must communicate their inner states, beliefs, and thoughts about an object or situation to others. Only when other people share similar states, beliefs, and thoughts about the same object or situation can they share a reality. For example, two colleagues could both be upset at work. However, if one of the two is upset because of something his or her boss said, and the other is upset because his or her car broke down, they do not share the same reality. Although both share similar emotions, these emotions do not result from the same object or situation. From this example, the importance of a shared reality for the pursuit of goals with others becomes apparent. Both people might have the goal to regulate their
emotions and to calm down, but they will not be able to help each other before they have created a shared reality. They first need to share their inner states and the reasons for these inner states before any interpersonal support can become effective. Similarly, even if both people are upset because of the same comment from their boss, they will not have a shared reality if they do not communicate their feelings and thoughts, and thus will not have the common understanding that their boss’ comment is the reason for their feelings.

Sharing a reality with others fulfills several important purposes (Echterhoff et al., 2009): First, one’s feelings and thoughts are validated when others experience them too (Asch, 1956). Sharing a reality with others thus means people’s own inner states feel more true, valid, and real when others share them. Second, a shared reality creates a bond between individuals that allows them to experience commonality (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Clark & Kashima, 2007; Levine & Higgins, 2001). The experience of sharing the same reality can thus lay the foundation for cooperation and goal pursuit with others (Van Ginkel & van Knippenberg, 2008) and facilitate more effective negotiations (Swaab, Postmes, van Beest, & Spears, 2007; Thompson, 1991). A shared reality with others can even intensify one’s goal pursuit (Carr & Walton, 2014; Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011).

Importantly, by establishing a shared reality with others, individuals can more efficiently coordinate their goal pursuit with others. A shared reality can thus be the first step in the pursuit of goals with others, creating a common ground on which to build. In one study, Echterhoff, Higgins, Kopietz, and Groll (2008) demonstrated the psychological functions of a shared reality. Specifically, participants learned a few ambiguous personal characteristics about a target person. They were asked to discuss their impression about the target with someone else (ie., the audience) who allegedly either liked or disliked the target person. Importantly, the audience was either described as an in-group member (to activate the goal to cooperate) or an out-group member (to lower the motivation to cooperate). Participants were then asked to give their own description of the target person, and were asked again about their impression a week later. The results showed participants tried to tune their description of the target to the attitude of the in-group audience to establish a shared reality: The participants described the target more positively when they thought the audience liked the target, compared to when they thought the audience disliked the target. Participants did not tune their messages accordingly when the audience was an out-group, thus showing less effort to create a shared reality. This phenomenon does not
merely reflect differences in communication. When asked again about their attitudes about the target a week later, participants who had tuned their message toward the in-group audience remembered more congruent characteristics about the target; that is, they remembered more positive aspects when they thought the audience liked the target, and more negative aspects when they thought the audience disliked the target. Thus, participants established a shared reality by sharing the audience’s evaluation. Because shared reality serves a function to create commonality with others and lay the foundation for cooperation, the shared-reality effect was eliminated in the conditions in which participants communicated with an out-group member. With the out-group member, participants tuned their descriptions toward the attitude of the audience, but their own assessment of the target was unaffected by the audience’s opinion of the target.

Despite facilitating communication and cooperation with others, shared reality does not always lead to positive outcomes. The more a group shares the same reality, the more prone the group may be to suboptimal decision-making based on groupthink and the neglect of alternative ideas (Stasser, 1999; Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). Similarly, shared reality allows group members to more easily deceive each other, as has been shown even with primates (Santos, Nissen, & Ferrugia, 2006). Finally, shared reality can also be an illusion, whereby people falsely believe others share their emotions and thoughts (Keysar & Barr, 2002). In the above example, if one colleague notices the other person is also upset, she might assume the other person is also upset because of the comment their boss made, without knowing the other person is upset because her car broke down. In this case, shared reality is an illusion that one person experiences, but this experience might still lead her to feel validated in her emotions and to feel more connected to the other person.

2.2.2 Others Augment Perceived Impact of Actions

Establishing a shared reality may be one important part of coordinating goal pursuit. But the presence of others can affect one’s goal pursuit even more fundamentally. Some of the oldest studies in social psychology examined the effects of the presence of others on people’s behavior (Zajonc & Sales, 1966). More specifically, observers influence people’s performance and behavior via social facilitation and social inhibition (see Bond & Titus, 1983; Latané, 1981). Even simple pictures of watching eyes can lead people to cheat less and be more generous (Haley & Fessler, 2005; Rigdon, Ishii, Watabe, & Kitayama, 2009). These studies explained the influence of
observers on behavior in terms of impression management, arousal, or both (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, & Salomon, 1999; Cottrell, Wack, Sekerak, & Rittle, 1968).

More recent research moved from effects of the presence of observers on people’s outward behavior, to studying people’s perceptions of their behavior. Following from the principle of coordination, actions performed in the presence of others might carry more meaning for the individual because “we” observed the action. People might make inferences about the thoughts of the observers and align their perceptions with the thoughts of the observer. If observers only affect people’s outward behavior, but their perceptions remained unaffected, observers might exert their social influence via simple monitoring behavior (e.g., people try harder when someone is watching, because trying hard is normative and approved by others). However, if observers affect people’s perceptions of their own behavior, the presence of observers might lead people to experience a (potentially illusionary) shared reality with the observer. Thus, the presence of an observer might validate one’s own perceptions and make them seem magnified.

A first test of whether the presence of others affects people’s perceptions of their own actions explores a special case of social presence: do something simultaneously with another person. Simultaneous actions require greater coordination with others. The alignment of people’s actions may lead them to align their perceptions about these actions as well. People routinely project their inner states onto others (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003), so that people might also project their evaluations of the simultaneous action onto the other person, or the other people, and thus feel validated in their evaluations. Indeed, research by Boothby et al. (2014) has shown that a simultaneous experience is intensified, even without communicating about the experience. In their studies, when people ate chocolate simultaneously with another person, they liked it better than when they ate it in the presence of another person, who was working on another task. Thus, tasting the chocolate simultaneously with another person intensified the taste. Possibly, participants might have experienced illusionary shared reality, which validated their own liking of the chocolate. Interestingly, when people tasted bitter chocolate that tasted bad, they judged it to be less likeable when they tasted it simultaneously with another person than when that other person was present but doing something else (Boothby et al., 2014). Thus, the positive experience of tasting pleasant chocolate was more intense when another person had the same experience simultaneously, and the negative experience of tasting bitter chocolate was more intense when someone
else was having the same experience. In neither of these studies did people communicate with each other regarding their liking or disliking of the chocolate. Instead, people might have inferred the other person who shared the same experience also had the same thoughts and feelings, which in turn amplified their own thoughts and feelings. Following from the principle of coordination, the perception of a shared reality might have led participants to align their judgments with the (assumed) judgments of others, and to feel validated.

To affect perceptions of one’s actions, pursuing actions simultaneously might not be necessary. The presence of an observer might be enough to activate people’s tendency to establish a shared reality and to coordinate their perceptions with others. More specifically, people might project their own evaluations of their actions on the observer, which in turn augments their perceptions. Note that whereas Boothby et al. (2014) found no effect for the presence of others per se, the “others” in their experiment were not observing the action. Observing, like co-acting, may still augment perception. For example, when someone spills water while another person is watching, he or she might be annoyed with him- or herself for being clumsy, and might infer the observer thinks the same, which validates and increases the initial perception of the clumsy action.

To test whether the presence of observers has an impact on how people perceive their own behavior, Steinmetz, Xu, Zhang, and Fishbach (2016) observed participants during different actions (e.g., eating, taking a test). For example, in one study, all participants were asked to eat a small snack-size portion of chips. Some participants ate while a camera pointed directly at them, whereas control participants ate alone and unobserved. All participants ate the same amount of chips, but the observed participants afterward reported they thought the portion they ate was larger, compared to what the unobserved participants thought they themselves ate. Subjectively, the portion seemed bigger to observed participants, presumably because being observed made the action feel more meaningful.

Steinmetz et al. (2016) also investigated whether mistakes seem bigger when an observer witnesses them. In one study, participants took an alleged test of their ability to detect fake smiles, during which they were either observed (by another person sitting next to them) or were alone. All participants received the same amount of positive and negative feedback (i.e., whether their answers were correct or incorrect) during the test. After the test, in the observed condition, participants believed that they had gained a higher number of points for correct answers and at the same time lost a
higher number of points for incorrect answers, compared to what unob-
served participants reported. Thus, observed participants magnify their gains
and their losses. These results suggest that observers can fundamentally affect
how people experience their own actions. Importantly, participants did not
simply try to give more favorable or desirable answers when they were
observed. Instead, both their successes and their failures were magnified
when someone had witnessed (and thus potentially validated) them.

Taken together, the research on effects of being observed shows how
others can, by their mere presence, affect individuals’ perceptions of their
own behavior. When observed, people can experience a shared reality
with the observer to the extent that their perception is augmented by the
(inferred) perception of the observer. Thus, simply being watched by some-
one triggers psychological processes that reflect coordination.

2.2.3 Others Support Goal Pursuit
The presence of others can be more directly instrumental for goal pursuit
when those others support goal pursuit. When coordinating with others
to pursue one’s goals, other people can, for instance, give valuable feedback.
Through feedback, people help each other promote various pursuits, such as
academic, health, career, and relationship goals (Baker & McNulty, 2013;
Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013). One
function of feedback is to inform individuals either of their level of commit-
ment to a goal, or of their rate of progress toward a goal (Fishbach, Eyal, &
Finkelstein, 2010; Fishbach, Koo, & Finkelstein, 2014). Positive feedback
increases motivation when it signals commitment: The perception that
the goal is valuable and expectancy of successful pursuit is high (Bandura,
1991; Feather, 1982; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Negative feedback, by
contrast, increases motivation when it signals lack of progress or insufficient
resource investment (ie, the presence of discrepancy; Carver & Scheier,
1998; Higgins, 1987). Thus, through feedback, people coordinate with
others their goal pursuit such that they adjust their commitment and
perceived progress to motivate goal pursuit.

Whereas the content of the feedback is undoubtedly relevant, another
important aspect is the source of the feedback. People might react differently
to feedback depending on whether it comes from an acquaintance, a super-
ordinate, or a friend. Whereas positive feedback might be provided easily
and might be received well regardless of the specific source, the provision
and reception of negative feedback might be more contingent on the rela-
tionship between the feedback giver and receiver. The deeper and more
stable the relationship between the feedback giver and receiver, the more negative feedback might be given, for at least two reasons. First, the relationship might be perceived as strong enough to withstand negative exchanges (Feeney & Lemay, 2012). Second, the meaning of feedback depends on the depth of the relationships. The same (negative) feedback signals low commitment in shallow relationships and lack of sufficient investment (or progress) in deep relationships. Because insufficient investment is motivating (and low commitment is not), one might expect that, as the relationship deepens, people might seek more negative feedback, give more negative feedback, and respond more to negative feedback by engaging in behavioral change.

In a test of the hypothesis that negative feedback is more prevalent in close relationships, Finkelstein, Fishbach, and Tu (2016) asked participants to think about a friend either by emphasizing the relationship as close (ie, thinking about their similarities) or by emphasizing the relationship as more distant (ie, thinking about their differences). Then, participants reported how much they would like to receive negative feedback from this person in order to improve their performance across several domains. Indeed, people were more willing to seek negative feedback from the person when they thought about the relationship as close (compared to distant). Other studies further demonstrated that people also gave more negative feedback to close others and responded more to negative feedback by investing resources in pursuing their goals (Finkelstein et al., 2016). Thus, the closer their relationships with others, the more likely people were to endorse negative feedback. Part of coordinating goal pursuit with others appears to be seeking and using feedback from others, even when expecting it may be unpleasant.

Aside from providing feedback, a direct way in which others are instrumental in the pursuit of one’s goals is by supporting goal pursuit (eg, giving practical help, or emotional support). But does the pursuit of one’s goals also affect the relationships that people have with others who help them? People might feel closer to others who support them in the pursuit of their goals. Thus, by deepening their relationships with others who are instrumental for their goals, people might be able to further facilitate coordination with others and pursue their goals more effectively. Indeed, research has shown that people differ in their appreciation of someone who helps them, depending on how useful they perceive the help to be (Converse & Fishbach, 2012). More specifically, people appreciate the helper more during goal pursuit, and their appreciation drops after the goal has been reached. Similarly,
people feel closer to someone who is instrumental in reaching an ongoing goal, and in turn feel less close to the instrumental other when the goal is completed or nears completion (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). In one study, participants were asked to name close others who were either instrumental for a focal goal (ie, they made progress toward that goal easier) or who were not instrumental for that goal (did not affect progress on the goal). For instance, a study partner can be instrumental for an academic-achievement goal, but might not be instrumental for health goals. Participants were then asked to think about the work ahead of them on that focal goal, or they were asked to think about the progress that they had already made. When thinking about the work ahead, participants reported feeling closer to others who were instrumental for that goal. However, when thinking about the progress they have already made, participants did not feel closer to these instrumental others. Thus, pursuing one’s goals with the support of others affects the relationships that people have with these others. Following the principle of coordination, people strengthen their relationships with those who support their ongoing goals.

3. INDIVIDUALS PURSUING GROUP GOALS

In this section, we move to situations in which people pursue goals that benefit a group. We distinguish between situations in which an individual is pursuing a goal for a group (eg, an individual family member buying groceries for the family) and situations in which group members pursue a shared goal together (eg, a couple working together to achieve financial stability). In the case of individuals working alone, we focus on how interpersonal closeness leads to a preference for actions that benefit the group as a whole, with less concern over the distribution of these benefits between group members. In the case of group members working together on a shared goal, we focus on the patterns of coordination between group members and how they respond to others’ existing and missing actions.

3.1 Pursuing Goals for the Self and Others

People routinely pursue goals for the self and others, such as planning a family vacation, or making decisions on behalf of a group. In such situations, people need to coordinate their needs and preferences with others. Here, we explore the tension embedded in these situations between maximizing the benefits for the group versus ensuring equal distribution of benefits.
For example, the family member who plans a family vacation may choose a destination that some family members will love and others will somewhat like, or a destination that every family member will somewhat like. Similarly, an employee working on a team may choose to make a decision that benefits him or her a lot and benefits the rest of the group a little, or a decision that benefits everyone a little. Using the principle of coordination, we explore the possibility that interpersonal closeness between group members increases the emphasis on joint benefits and maximizes the payoff for the group as a whole, with less concern over the allocation of benefits (i.e., “who gets what”). We further explore the circumstances under which such a tendency to focus on total benefits in closer relationships results in more willingness to take resources from close (vs distant) others as long as the benefit for the taker is larger than the cost for the giver.

3.1.1 Interpersonal Closeness and Jointly Maximizing Choice

The extent to which people coordinate their efforts when pursuing goals for the self and others largely depends on how close people feel to these others. Interpersonal closeness has various facets, from the frequency and diversity of interactions (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) to an increased liking of the relationship partner (Rubin, 1970). Much research has focused on the cognitive, overlapped mental representation of the self and other (Aron et al., 1991), or “self—other overlap,” as a way to operationalize closeness. One way to think of self—other overlap is in terms of two circles—one representing the self and one representing the other—that overlap to different degrees, from not at all to completely. The closer someone feels to a relationship partner, the more heavily overlapped circles they would choose to describe their relationship, revealing a greater degree of perceived overlap between the self and the other. Thus, closeness blurs the boundary between self and other and makes people more likely to view the self and the other as overlapped entities that are each part of a self—other collective (Aron et al., 1991).

Self—other overlap has manifold consequences for goal pursuit. The more people feel a part of a self—other collective, the more they feel they share the desirable outcomes of close others, such as information, consumption, knowledge, moral credentials, and success (Kouchaki, 2011; Tesser, 1988; Wegner, 1987; Wegner et al., 1991). Furthermore, when people feel a part of a self—other collective, giving to a close other can feel like giving to the self (Aron et al., 1991; Batson et al., 1997; Cialdini et al., 1997; Clark, 1983; Jarymowicz, 1992).
When making decisions for the group, greater closeness in turn entails greater emphasis on maximizing the total benefits for the self—other collective (the “joint pie”). This joint-pie focus could mean greater giving to a close (as opposed to distant) other, whenever giving increases the total benefits: The receiver is getting more than what the giver is losing. But interpersonal closeness might also increase taking from a close other for the same reason it increases giving—a greater concern over the total benefit for the self—other collective. Specifically, people are more likely to take from a close rather than distant other when doing so can increase the total resources for the self—other collective. For example, people in a closer relationship would be more comfortable changing their vacation destination to a place they themselves love when the other person likes the destination a little (vs when they both like it a little), whereas people in less close relationships would be less likely to take the self-benefitting option. Such “friendly taking”—a preference for a self-benefiting allocation that also offers greater benefit in total in close relationships—would be a stronger test for the notion that people wish to maximize total benefit. Presumably, giving to a close (vs distant) other can either be motivated by greater concern for closer others, or by greater concern with maximizing total benefits. By contrast, taking from a closer other when doing so increases the total benefits can only be driven by concern with total benefits.

Research supporting the “friendly taking” hypothesis finds people take from their close friends more than from their distant friends, but only when doing so increases the total benefit (Tu, Shaw, & Fishbach, 2016). When taking reduces the total benefit, people take less from closer others. For example, in one study, participants thought about one of their friends. To manipulate interpersonal closeness, participants focused their thoughts about this friend either in terms of a close collective (eg, “we”), or in more distant, separate terms (eg, “he/she and I”). Participants then made a choice for themselves and this friend between two different packages of chocolate truffles: Package “A”: “7 truffles for yourself and 3 truffles for your friend (10 truffles in total)”; and Package “B”: “2 truffles for yourself and 4 truffles for your friend (6 truffles in total).” Package A offered a greater benefit (ie, more truffles) for the self, as well as a higher total benefit (ie, more truffles in total). By contrast, Package B had more truffles for the friend, but a lower total benefit. Consistent with the idea that people are more likely to take from close others, more participants in the close than distant condition chose the self-benefitting package.
Other studies show that this effect emerged because close others were more focused on the total amount of resources the self and the other received together. To test for traces of greater concern for the total benefit on the cognitive level, the researchers studied information acquisition and retention. In terms of information acquisition, they found that when the other person is close rather than distant, people are more likely to acquire information about the total benefit to aid their decision. In addition, when choosing for the self and closer others, people may find information about the total benefit more sufficient for making the decision, and do not further acquire information about the specific allocation for the self and other. For example, in one study, participants chose between two “massage packages” for the self and either a close or distant other. Participants read that for each package, three pieces of information were available: (1) the duration of massage for them, (2) the duration of massage for the friend, and (3) the total duration of massage for them and the friend. The participants’ task was to choose which single piece of information they wanted to reveal in order to choose between the packages. As expected, those in closer relationship were more likely to choose information on the total than those in more shallow relationship.

In terms of information retention, if people in closer relationships indeed focus more on the total benefit when processing the choice options, they should retain the total-benefit information better and show better memory for it when unexpectedly tested later. Indeed, in a study that used a similar massage-package scenario, with a choice between two packages that varied in the massage length for the self, the other, and the total length, participants who were choosing for themselves and for a close (vs distant) friend displayed better memory for the total massage time when unexpectedly asked to recall all details on the packages.

Other studies showed this effect is not driven by close friends’ intention to reallocate the resource; people were taking more from a close friend even when they had no opportunity to redistribute the resource. In addition, people were taking more from a close friend even when they had no opportunity for future reciprocity. Moreover, because people also gave more to close than distant others when they could increase the size of the pie by doing so, anticipated forgiveness was unlikely to drive taking.

### 3.1.2 Implications for Infringement of Intellectual Property

The aforementioned analysis has implications for how people reason about unauthorized use of intellectual property. Infringement of intellectual property is on the rise in modern society as people have greater access to materials
on the Web, including art (e.g., music), science (e.g., research papers), and so on. The temptation to use these materials without paying copyrights is large. After all, the benefit for the user is clear and the cost to the producer of the materials is rather vague. At times, producers of materials are further criticized for charging people for their products. For example, drug companies are often criticized for charging patients for research and development (R&D), particularly when these patients lack the economic resources to fund these development expenses (e.g., the popular slogan “patents kill patients”).

According to the principle of coordination to maximize joint benefits, people are often hesitant to pay for intellectual property because they perceive a high cost for the self and a small benefit for the recipient. Hence, the individual paying for intellectual property might feel she reduced the total benefit for the self—other collective: she paid a high cost, and the owner of the property received a small benefit. By contrast, by this logic, infringement seems more economical for the collective because neither the user nor the owner incurs a cost. For example, the person who paid for downloaded music delivered some money to a large company (i.e., a high cost for the self, a small benefit for the company). If, instead, she downloaded the music illegally, she paid nothing and the company lost nothing (in her perception); thus, the joint pie is larger.

Based on the previous discussion, people are more likely to consider joint benefits when in closer relationships, for example, when they consider violating copyrights owned by their in-group. Thus, people should generally be more comfortable violating copyrights laws for materials owned by the in-group than for those owned by the out-group. Specifically, because people are closer to their in-group, they are more likely to consider the total benefit for the group and for them; therefore, they will decide to use copyrighted materials without paying for them.

In a study that explored this possibility, Tu and Fishbach (2015d) asked participants to determine the fine for a student who violated copyright law by either downloading academic materials produced by a unit in their own university or by a unit in another university. Although participants acknowledged violation in both cases, they assigned smaller fines for the person who violated the copyrights of his own institution, and reported that person had some sort of “shared ownership.” Other studies further show people are more forgiving of copyright violations when the owner is an in-group member, but only as long as they perceive the harm to be minimal. That is, people do not wish to harm their in-group; only to the extent that the
harm imposed by the individual user is seen as negligible (which is often the case with copyrighted materials) will people be more likely to infringe on the copyrights of their in-group than an out-group.

These findings have policy implications for decisions involving R&D costs in medical research. Indeed another study (Tu & Fishbach, 2015d) finds people prefer that medical companies outsource their R&D costs to patients in other countries. In other words, people prefer not to pay for medical companies in their own country, but are more willing to pay for medical companies in other countries. The reason is that people feel they mentally share the knowledge that was produced in their country by scientists that are part of their society.

### 3.2 Pursuing Goals With Others

We have reviewed low-level patterns of coordination in situations in which coordination is not necessary to complete a task. Moving to shared goals—those goals that a collection of individuals works together to achieve (eg, engaging in social movements, volunteering, generating ideas in team meetings, and playing team sports)—coordination becomes a more central and necessary part of goal pursuit. Hence, researchers and practitioners alike have focused on how to improve coordination for shared goal pursuits. This research finds that coordinating efforts when pursuing shared goals does not always work well. When collaborating with others on shared goals, a common phenomenon is social loafing: the tendency for individuals to expend less effort when working collectively than when working individually, which often undermines successful group work (Karau & Williams, 1993; Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). To prevent social loafing, past research has shown, for instance, that holding people accountable for individual contributions or giving people meaningful tasks can be effective (Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981; Williams & Karau, 1991).

In this section, we explore boundaries of social loafing and whether circumstances exist in which joint goal pursuit can increase effort contribution compared to individual goal pursuit. We suggest such a pattern is possible for certain people (ie, interdependent self-construal) and for certain situations (ie, when one’s actions have the potential to inspire others to act). We then explore two patterns of coordination in working with others on a shared goal: increasing effort in response to others’ missing contributions versus in response to others’ existing contributions. Specifically, we ask when group members coordinate by compensating for others’ lack of actions and when they coordinate by following others’ actions. Finally, we explore
two underlying motivations in working toward a group goal: expressing support via a symbolic contribution from a large number of group members, and making a difference via a substantial contribution from a few group members.

3.2.1 Inspiration Versus Loafing: A Matter of Self-construal

Whether social loafing occurs might depend on the individuals’ self-construal. Markus and Kitayama (1991) introduced this fundamental psychological dimension, which capitalizes on the distinction between an independent self-construal, which means to define one’s identity primarily through one’s individual interests and behaviors, and an interdependent self-construal, which means to define one’s identity primarily through one’s social roles and relationships. Variations in self-construal have been shown to affect social perception and information processing in general. For example, independent individuals focus on a single target event and tend to disregard the target’s context (Lam, Buehler, McFarland, Ross, & Cheung, 2005), whereas interdependent individuals pay more attention to contextual information (Kim, Grimm, & Markman, 2007; Konrath, Bushman, & Grove, 2009).

Because interdependent individuals tend to perceive stronger relationships in their environment in general, and between others and themselves in particular, than independent individuals, interdependence might also reduce and even reverse social loafing. If interdependent individuals see their behavior as more related to other people’s behavior, they might feel their loafing affects the group to a larger extent, such that their lack of action is causing others not to act. The perception of mutual influence might further motivate these individuals to work harder in a group setting, because presumably their actions are diagnostic of what others would do in a similar situation.

By contrast, independent individuals might focus on their own behavior and might neglect any influence that their own behavior might have on others’ behavior and thereby on the group goal. For these individuals, the presence of others suggests these others might pick up the slack and the independent individuals can relax their efforts.

In line with this reasoning, Steinmetz and Fishbach (2016) demonstrated that individuals who express an interdependent self-construal work harder when they are part of an alleged virtual group, compared to when they work alone. However, independent individuals display the classic social-loafing effect, by which they work harder when they are alone compared...
to when they believe they are part of group. In one study, participants were asked to give as many ideas as possible for the promotion of a protein bar. In addition, participants were told their answers would be combined with other people from their university (group condition) or would be counted individually (alone condition). Interdependent participants gave more ideas (i.e., worked harder) in the group condition than in the alone condition, whereas independent participants showed the opposite pattern and worked less in the group condition. These results suggest the pursuit of goals for the self and others is not only influenced by how close people feel to these other people, but also by interindividual differences in how people construe their identity and their relationships to others. These differences in self-construal affect whether people see the most benefit in coordinating their work together with others, or in pursuing goals in a primarily individual manner.

3.2.2 Responding to Others’ Completed and Missing Actions

People respond to others’ contributions and lack of contributions to a shared goal similarly to how they respond to their own existing and missing actions toward their personal goals; hence, understanding how people organize their own actions toward a personal goal can help shed light on the patterns of coordination with others (Fishbach et al., 2010, 2014; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Personal goals often involve a sequence of actions that unfold over time (e.g., career, health, or relationship goals). People choose their actions with respect to other, completed or absent actions toward the same goals. Research on the dynamics of self-regulation explored the relationships between several such actions toward the same goal (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Fishbach & Zhang, 2008; Koo & Fishbach, 2008; Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007). This framework distinguishes between pursuing a goal in a dynamic of highlighting—choosing actions that reinforce previously selected actions (e.g., conserve water and recycle)—and pursuing the same goal in a dynamic of balancing—choosing actions that compensate for other, missing actions (e.g., do not conserve water but recycle). When people highlight a goal, they are more likely to attend to it in the present if they have attended to it in the past or plan to attend to it in the future; in other words, they wish to display behavioral consistency. By contrast, when they balance, people are more likely to attend to a goal if they have not previously attended to it or have not planned to attend to it in the future.

Which pattern of coordination people follow and, specifically, whether actions reinforce (highlighting) or substitute (balancing) each other depends
on how pursuers interpret and represent their own actions. Research distinguishes between two potential representations of actions: as expressing commitment toward a desirable state and as making progress toward this state. In a commitment representation, people ponder whether a goal is worth pursuing. They infer from observing themselves pursuing that goal that, indeed, the goal is important or enjoyable (hence valuable) and expectancy of attainment is high (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974; Vroom, 1964). Thus, people infer commitment based on engagement (Arkes & Ayton, 1999; Bem, 1972; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Higgins, 2006) and they highlight. By contrast, the focus on missing actions toward a goal undermines commitment in these situations, because the individual infers he or she cares less about that goal. In a progress representation, individuals monitor their rate of progress toward a goal. They infer from completed actions that their rate of progress is sufficient, and they infer from the lack of actions the need for progress; hence, they balance (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 1998; Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999; Higgins, 1987; Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006; Locke & Latham, 1990). Individuals who adopt a progress representation of actions pursue a goal if they consider missing actions.

These representations of actions—commitment and progress—have opposite implications for people’s motivation to pursue their goals in the present. When actions signal a boost in commitment, attending to what one has accomplished encourages goal-congruent actions more than attending to what one has left undone, because completed actions increase commitment. However, when actions signal progress has been made, attending to what one has left undone encourages goal-congruent actions more than attending to what one has accomplished, because missing actions signal a need to progress.

Whether people represent their actions in terms of commitment (and highlight) or progress (and balance) depends on the individual and the context. In particular, individuals’ preexisting commitment to a goal influences the meaning they assign to goal-related actions and thus the relative impact of completed versus missing actions on motivation (Fishbach et al., 2006; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). For individuals with low commitment to the goal (eg, a dieter who has just started dieting), goal actions signal an increase in commitment and spur further similar actions in a dynamic of highlighting (eg, when the dieter chooses a healthy meal, he or she might feel more committed and also buy more fruit). However, for individuals with high commitment (eg, a dieter who has been eating healthily for a long time), the same action might signal progress has been made on the goals
and efforts can be reduced in a dynamic of balancing (eg, this dieter feels that after having chosen a healthy meal, he or she deserves a dessert).

Because parallels exist in how people organize their own actions and how they coordinate between their own and others’ actions, individuals can choose to balance for others’ lack of actions by contributing to a shared goal more if others have not, or individuals can highlight others’ actions by contributing to a shared goal primarily if others have as well. Specifically, group members who are less committed to a shared goal (eg, new group members) wish to assess whether the shared goal is worth pursuing. Others’ prior contributions should increase their own contributions more than missing contributions, because these less-committed individuals are more likely to infer from existing contributions that the goal is worth pursuing. Thus, less-committed group members follow (or highlight) other group members’ actions. They increase contributions if others have contributed, and decrease contributions if others have not contributed. By contrast, highly committed group members wish to contribute to a shared goal mainly to facilitate progress; thus, they wish to assess others’ pace of progress. Committed group members infer a need for progress from others’ missing contributions more than others’ existing contributions. These individuals increase their own contributions when they can compensate for (ie, balance out) others’ insufficient actions more so than if others have contributed.

Koo and Fishbach (2008) demonstrated these patterns of coordination with other group members in the context of a campaign to support AIDS orphans. The solicited population included uncommitted supporters, who had not contributed before (the “cold list”), as well as committed supporters, who had donated on a regular basis over the past year (the “hot list”). They all learned about the campaign goal (to raise 10 million Korean Won) and that approximately half the money had already been raised. Some participants received a solicitation letter that emphasized the glass half full (other group members had donated half; ie, other’s actions); the rest received a letter that emphasized the glass half empty (half was still missing; ie, others’ lack of action). Among low-commitment people, an emphasis on existing contributions increased donations more than an emphasis on missing contributions, because low-commitment individuals were highlighting others’ actions. But among high-commitment individuals, an emphasis on missing contributions increased donations more than an emphasis on existing contributions, because high-commitment individuals were balancing for others’ lack of action (Fig. 3). This pattern is almost identical to the one observed
for personal goal pursuits (e.g., deciding to buy fruit based on what one has eaten before; Koo & Fishbach, 2008).

In addition to goal commitment, group identification affects individuals’ concerns with whether a shared goal is worth pursuing versus whether the pursuit is progressing at a sufficient pace. Thus, group identification affects the pattern of coordination with other group members (Fishbach et al., 2011). Group identification refers to a person’s readiness to consider herself a member of a particular social group (Cameron, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). The more individuals identify with a group, the more they feel part of the group (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; McCauley, 2001); thus, they are less likely to ask whether a shared goal is worth pursuing and are more likely to question whether the group has made sufficient progress.

Because of this impact of identification, an emphasis on others’ actions should increase contributions among low-group identifiers (who highlight), and an emphasis on other members’ lack of action should encourage high-group identifiers to increase their own contributions (they balance). In this way, low identifiers mimic other group members’ actions (they contribute if others have) more than high identifiers, who contribute if others have not.

A study illustrating these effects used nominal groups in which participants worked individually but assumed their unidentified input would be collapsed with other group members (Jackson & Williams, 1985). The
specific group goal was to generate 50 promotion ideas for a protein cereal bar. The researchers manipulated identification by having participants purportedly form a group with people who were socially close fellow students from their own university (high identification) or people from different academic institutes (low identification). Participants learned that some of the group members had already completed the study, and the framing of contributions by others (purportedly, 50%) was manipulated. Participants were informed either that those other group members had contributed about half of the ideas—glass half full—or that half of the ideas were missing—glass half empty—to meet the goal. This study found that attending to existing (vs missing) contributions increased the perceived value of the shared goal and, in turn, increased idea generation among low identifiers—those who worked with socially distant others. By contrast, attending to remaining (vs completed) contributions increased the perceived need for progress, which in turn increased the number of generated ideas among high identifiers—those who worked with socially close others (Fig. 4).

Another study tested for the effects of identification with beneficiaries of a group’s efforts, and documented similar effects to identification with other group members who contribute to a shared goal. That is, regardless of

![Figure 4](image-url) Idea generation as a function of identification (low: socially distant others; high: socially close others) and focus on accumulated versus remaining contributions. Reprinted from Fishbach, A., Henderson, D.H., & Koo, M. (2011). Pursuing goals with others: group identification and motivation resulting from things done versus things left undone. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 140, 520—534. Copyright (2011), with permission from American Psychological Association.
whether identification is with the contributors or the receivers, similar patterns of coordination between group members emerge. Specifically, Fishbach et al. (2011) ran a campaign to help children in Kenya that was established following a period of political riots. In the high-identification condition, the solicitation letter referred to the children in need as “Our children,” whereas in the low-identification condition, the letter referred to them as the “Children in Kenya.” In addition, the solicitation letter either emphasized others’ actions—that others had thus far raised about half of the money—or lack of action—that half of the money was missing. As expected, low identifiers (“Children in Kenya”) highlighted others’ actions: they gave more after reading that others had given half of the money versus that half of the money was missing. By contrast, high identifiers (“Our children”) balanced for others’ lack of action: they gave more in response to a message on missing (vs existing) contributions. These findings show people pursue their shared goals in similar ways to their individual goals. When coordinating with others, people make the same inferences about others’ actions as they do about their own actions and show the same dynamics of highlighting versus balancing.

The research described here sheds further light on the potential cause of social loafing, by examining the circumstances under which individuals contribute to a goal primarily because they perceive that others do or do not contribute. Whenever individuals decrease their contributions if others contribute (and increase if others did not contribute) in a dynamic of balancing, we can refer to them as “free riders” because others’ contributions justify the individuals’ loafing. However, whenever individuals increase their contributions if others contribute (and decrease if others did not contribute) in a dynamic of highlighting, we cannot refer to these individuals as free riders because free riding assumes the opposite pattern of coordination, whereby the person loafs if others work. In the latter case, loafing individuals are not free riding on others’ efforts, but rather are following a perceived group norm of low commitment and hence low contributions to the shared goal.

3.2.3 Motivation to Contribute: Express Support Versus Make a Difference

The aforementioned analysis has important implications for charitable giving, which we address here. When giving to charity, coordination with others is essential, because charities are based on the joint efforts of many individuals. An individual who considers investing his or her resources into a
certain charity has two important decisions to make: whether and how much to give. Research has distinguished between two types of motivations—express support for a social cause versus make a difference for that social cause—that separately influence the decision of whether to give versus the decision of how much to give (Koo, Fishbach, & Park, 2016). An appeal to show support can speak to the less committed, who can express commitment by deciding to give to the cause. However, an appeal to make a difference can motivate those who are already committed, and can signal to them that more help is needed, which can lead them to give more.

Koo et al. (2016) conducted several field experiments to test whether the appeals to “express support” and “make a difference” tap into two different motivations in coordinating contributions to a shared goal. For example, in one study, visitors to a university Website were invited to write a message to children in poverty, and the university donated $0.01 per written character on behalf of the visitors. Using this paradigm, lengthier messages would result in larger donations. Participants were invited to either “express support” or “make a difference,” or received a control (“help”) message. Results showed more people decided to participate in the express-support appeal (compared to the make-a-difference appeal and the help appeal). However, those who did participate wrote lengthier messages in the make-a-difference appeal (compared to other appeals, Fig. 5).

Notably, whether to give and how much to give are often related decisions because more people are willing to spare small amounts than large amounts. To test whether the effect of express-support appeals on the participation rate is orthogonal to the effect of make-a-difference appeals on the average contribution amount, another study measured the inferences observers make based on participation rate versus donation amount. This study showed people infer the general support for a cause from the number of contributors but not from the size of the average contribution, and they infer the interest in making a difference from the size of the average contribution but not from the number of contributors. Specifically, when they read about a high (vs low) participation rate, participants inferred donors give to show their support for a cause. However, participants did not make this inference when they read about a high (vs low) average donation amount. Rather, they inferred a greater motivation to make an impact for a cause from high (vs low) average donations and regardless of participation rate.

Taken together, these results show people have different notions of how to coordinate their goal pursuit with others, which can be activated by different appeals. Whereas an appeal for initial support motivates the
uncommitted, the already committed feel more motivated by appeals to their ability to make a difference by doing more. Importantly, charities are wise to appeal to both committed and uncommitted donors, because many small initial contributions can help as much as fewer larger ones. This research shows the crucial nature of tailoring the messages to instill the motivation to join efforts with others.

4. CONCLUSION

We explored the various ways in which the social context influences goal pursuit. We distinguished between social contexts in which individuals...
work on their personal goals and those contexts in which they work on group goals. With regard to personal goals, we distinguished between situations in which others provide information and situations in which they are merely present. With regard to group goals, we distinguished between situations in which people work alone toward a group goal and situations in which they join forces with other group members to achieve a shared goal.

Our review focuses on coordination of goal pursuits; hence, we left out much of the research on social influence, which does not assume a motivation to coordinate. In addition, this review is mainly focused on research coming from our lab, and we often left out other theories and findings. Rather than providing a comprehensive review of all the work on goal pursuit in a social context, our (more modest) goal was to demonstrate the principle of coordination across many, presumably only somewhat related phenomena. We argue that coordination can be strategic or not, can be required (or optional) to complete the task or not, and can be explicit or implicit. Coordination takes many facets. Yet, this simple principle explains numerous motivational phenomena. By Occam’s razor, or the law of parsimony, the principle of coordination is thus a useful tool for understanding past research on social context and for making future predictions on how social contexts affect motivation.

REFERENCES


