Personal Agency and Social Support: Substitutes of Complements?

Ayelet Fishbach

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In their target article, Milyavsky et al. (this issue) make a strong case for the substitutability between personal agency and social support. Across various domains, they find that perceived personal agency decreases the reliance on social support and perceived social support decreases the perceptions of personal agency. In my own research, I observed a similar substitutability between personal and social control; for example, the presence of external controls such as parental supervision undermined self-control in pursuing academic goals (Fishbach & Trope, 2005). Furthermore, research on balancing (Dhar & Simonson, 1999; Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009) and licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001) often observed substitutability among the means to a goal. It is clear that personal agency and social support can be, and often are, substitutional means for goal achievement.

This commentary starts where the target article ends—when (if ever) should we expect complementarity instead of substitutability between two means to achieving a goal? Milyavsky et al. (this issue) offer a boundary condition: agency and assistance should not undermine each other if one of them also serves as a means to another goal. Yet, I ask, when does perceiving one (agency or support) make it more likely that the person will also turn to the other? For example, when learning a new skill (such as playing tennis or speaking Yiddish), is it possible that the perception of social support makes people more confident in their personal ability, or that perceived ability increases the chances that the person will also seek assistance? Possibly, to master these skills, it is insufficient to rely on one means only. The learner would benefit from multiple routes or, alternatively, from a backup plan (i.e., if one means fails, they can rely on the other).

The notion that personal agency and social support could at times complement each other is consistent with a key tenet of Goal System Theory: Equifinal means, while often imposing redundancy (“all roads lead to Rome”), also increase confidence (the traveler is pretty confident she will make it to Rome, one way or another). Thus, while the advantage of multifinal means to a goal is that they maximize attainment (“feeding two birds with one scone”), their disadvantage is that these means could undermine (“dilute”) the perceived instrumentality of each means to the goal. And while the advantage of equifinal means is that they increase confidence, the person feels that a goal is within reach; the disadvantage is that they can be substitutable. Many (but not all the) times, pursuing one of these means will trigger disengagement with the other.

What’s Special About Social Support?

Does social support have a unique status as a means to a goal? Possibly yes. Social support could have a unique status if it implies that someone else is doing the work. In such a case, the person who holds the goal does not need to take any action, as someone or some people act on their behalf. This person might not even be aware that someone is pursuing a goal for them, which allows them to push that goal out of mind. For example, when stepping into a clean room, a person might not be aware that someone cleaned it for them and thus, that they hold the goal to keep this particular environment neat. Because most people delegate public health and safety to others, they can go through life paying little attention to the fact that they hold these goals. When delegating a goal to others implies that the person is unaware that they hold the goal and that they do not make plans to pursue it, social support constitutes a different category than any means people actively initiate by themselves.

Yet other times, social support might not be truly distinct from personal effort and does not undermine personal commitment to the goal. When hiring help, people might still see themselves as actively pursuing the goal even though they pay someone else to do so. Furthermore, people do not have clear-cut boundaries between themselves and others, leading them to perceive others’ actions as their own. Specifically, when holding a goal, people may believe that others’ actions are part of what “they” as a society, company, team, or family do, even if technically, they did not invest personal resources. If a person perceives others’ actions as their own (i.e., part of their extended self), social support has no distinct status compared with personal actions. In that case, the question of whether social support substitutes or complements personal agency is similar to the question of whether any two means (e.g., two agentic actions) complement versus substitute each other.

Research on self-other overlap identified that the boundaries between the self and others are far from clear-cut (Aron et al., 1991). Indeed, by the virtue of the pronoun “we,” it is difficult to distinguish between what a person did and what their social group did. A sport fan can say “we won the game” to describe the achievement of a group of
professional athletes that does not include him, just as an outer space fan can say “we landed on the moon in 1969” to describe the achievement of a group of astronauts. The linguistic ambiguity reflects the psychology of the speakers, as most people have no psychological need to clearly distinguish themselves from their group. Furthermore, the closer people are to someone, the more overlap they perceive between themselves and the other person. It is the reason people often have hard time recalling traits that are unique to them as opposed to traits that they share with their partner. For example, if both people in a couple like hiking, it would be easier for each partner to recall that hobby than if only one of them enjoys this activity.

This self-other overlap is consequential for how people pursue their goals. Often, they follow a pattern of compensation, where the social group’s effort substitute for one’s own (consistent with the target article). Consider, for example, division of labor. In a study by Wegner, Erber, and Raymond (1991), real couples outperformed pairs of strangers on a memory challenge. The real couples’ “secret” was an efficient division of labor. When couples learn new information, each person focuses on mastering the categories they are personally interested in while ignoring the information they assume their partner is interested in. Efficient division of labor also explains why couples often display unequal financial knowledge, as one person develops financial expertise, their partner stays relatively ignorant (Ward & Lynch, 2019).

But while division of labor is common, so is conformity. While at times people coordinate with group members by relaxing their efforts when others are working (they take turns), other times, they conform (Asch, 1956). When people conform, they work harder when other people are working. So, for example, people take environmental action because they perceive that others do so (e.g., reuse hotel towels when they learn that others do; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). Rather than leaving the work to others, they follow others.

Conformity can result from seeking social approval (normative conformity) or from trusting others have figured out the best ways of pursuing a goal (informational conformity or wisdom of the crowd, Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). But, importantly, conformity also results from perceived self-other overlap. If the person sees themselves as part of the group and other group members endorsed a goal, the person will feel that they too have endorsed that goal and will therefore choose actions consistent with this goal. When a student announces that her family wants her to become a lawyer, given that she is part of her family, she would work harder because of the family support (or, in this case, pressure).

To determine when people complement versus follow others who support their goals, we could start with the assumption that people treat others’ actions similarly to how they treat their own actions. The person asks themselves: Given what “we” did, what do “I” need to do? If they compensate, they answer that they should not invest in the goal. If they complement, they conclude that they should invest in that goal.

For personal actions, the decision of what to do next depends on whether people see the first action as expressing commitment, in which case similar actions will follow; or as making sufficient progress, in which case they will disengage (Fishbach, Koo, & Finkelstein, 2014). If, for example, a health-conscious person perceives their morning workout as an expression of commitment to a healthy lifestyle, they would be more likely to eat healthily after exercising. If this person perceives the workout as allowing sufficient progress, they will be more likely to indulge in unhealthy food subsequently.

Moving to group actions, or social support, we should expect a similar pattern. If someone else cleaned one’s office and that target person sees it as an expression of commitment to keeping the office neat, they will be more careful not to make a mess immediately after the office has been cleaned. If they perceive the same action as making sufficient progress, they will be extra messy now that their office has been cleaned.

Furthermore, because people generally wish to express consistent attitudes (e.g., dissonance theory, Festinger, 1957) but feel free to move away from their previous actions (e.g., licensing, Khan & Dhar, 2007; and variety seeking, McAllister & Pansieri, 1982), we should expect people to conform more to what other group members say than what these members do. And indeed, that is what we found (Tu & Fishbach, 2015). People tend to follow group members’ attitudes more than their actions. Just like people wish to be consistent with what they themselves said more than repeating the same action twice (or more), others’ stated goals elicit greater conformity than others’ actions. If the group endorses a new type of exercise, a group member will feel compelled to try it too. And in online shopping and media consumption, people tend to conform to what others liked (e.g., number of stars or thumbs up) more than what others consumed (e.g., information on sales or number of views; Tu & Fishbach, 2015). So, while compensation is one key principle in the relationship between personal agency and social support, we should often expect complementarity instead.

**What Factors Determine the Relationship Between Personal Agency and Social Support**

There are several factors that determine whether two equifinal means will act as substitutes or complements. We discussed earlier what pursuing a means signals for the individual—whether it expresses their commitment (in which case several means will be selected) or creates a sense of progress (so social support substitutes for personal agency and vice versa). Here, I review some other factors that determine the relationship between these two equifinal means (see summary in Table 1).

**A Preference for Mixed Versus Extreme Solution**

One factor that influences the relationship between personal agency and social support is whether people adopt a mixed
approach, by which they balance between multiple goals, versus an extreme approach, by which they prioritize one goal above all (Shaddy, Fishbach, & Simonson, 2021). Embedded within the idea that people substitute between personal agency and social support is the notion of resource conservation and investing “just enough” in a goal to meet a minimum threshold before turning to other goals that may have been neglected. While the assumption that people wish to balance between goals is often correct, it is not universally the case. At times, people wish to prioritize one goal above others.

Consider, for example, people’s resistance to exchange something sacred (e.g., a human organ) for something secular (e.g., money). People do not wish to make “taboo trade-offs,” which balance sacred and secular values (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). When it gets to saving human lives, people do not wish to do just enough, but rather, they wish to do all that is possible. Therefore, the presence of social support for one’s personal health (e.g., national health-care services) should not lead people to neglect their personal health, thus relying on external support to maintain their health. Similarly, the social support of education (in the form of affordable, public education) does not result in lazier students. Because good health and excellent education are not necessarily areas where people prefer to invest the minimum acceptable effort, the presence of social support likely encourages them to work harder personally.

**Increasing Versus Decreasing Marginal Utility**

In the equifinal structure of goal systems, when two means to a goal are substitutable, the marginal utility of pursuing one is decreasing after pursuing the other. For example, most people would derive a lot of utility from swimming. Adding a run immediately after might seem useful, but less so than the original swim. Adding a third workout, for instance, biking, would seem overkill. The instrumental value of this biking session would be negligible, relative to the previous two. The utility function for these actions is thus said to be concave (Greene & Baron, 2001). Put differently, because these are equifinal means for achieving the same goal (Orehek, Mauro, Kruglanski, & van der Bles, 2012), each successive workout yields less utility than the last.

But what if the person wishes to complete a triathlon? In this case, swimming, running, and biking complement each other. The utility function is now said to be convex (Festjens & Janiszewski, 2015). So, after swimming and running, the person is even more interested in completing the biking section than if they did not complete the previous exercises.

The same analysis can be applied to personal agency and social support. Hiring a personal trainer offers social support that can more meaningfully improve one’s physical shape if they also have sufficient personal agency (or will) to work out. And getting a tutor is much more beneficial for the student who is also self-motivated to study. As these examples demonstrate, to excel in many goals, it is not necessary to have both personal agency and social support, but social support is more beneficial when personal agency is high and personal agency can move the needle more when social support exists.

**Expertise**

The presence of social support might have a different effect on perceived agency or self-efficacy for novices than experts. Inexperienced individuals who embark a new goal wish to evaluate their personal commitment (Fishbach et al., 2014). They try to figure out whether they have whatever it takes to succeed, in terms of both personal value (“do I care?”) and success potential (“can I do it?”). For example, an amateur pianist wishes to determine whether they enjoy playing and have musical talent to do so well. Given that the presence of equifinal means boosts commitment (Etkin & Ratner, 2012), for these individuals, social assistance will support perceived self-efficacy. Even if the person does not use the assistance, the presence of help will help them believe they can master the skill on their own. So, for example, knowing that their teacher is available to check and correct their work will encourage young students to attempt newer problems and help them build their confidence in their own ability.

In contrast, experts are less likely to doubt their personal agency when social support is offered, so they might take the support and disengage from the goal. For example, managers and other high-power employees often delegate much of their work, thereby leaving the work to others who are available to help.

**Summary**

In conclusion, means to a goal often substitute for each other; there is a certain degree of redundancy in pursuing any goal. Specifically, when social assistance is offered, a person may relax their personal efforts. But other times, means to a goal complement each other. The person may work harder because they receive social assistance, which secures their sense that the goal is within reach.

This commentary offers a partial list of factors that determine the relationship between personal agency and social support as two equifinal means to pursuing goals.
Other factors might also matter. Possibly, when people believe personal agency is non-separable from social support (the two means form a gestalt), they will only attempt pursuing the goal if they perceive both agency and support. Another possibility is that the order of the means matters. For certain goals (e.g., managers’ goals), it might feel right to relax personal efforts when assistance is offered, so the person starts working by themselves and expects to get help and delegate work later on. For other goals (e.g., learning), it might feel more appropriate to start with social support and gain independency over time.

Regardless of the relationship between the two routes to a goal, it is also that case that social support rarely has a unique status. Just like the triathlon athlete who needs to practice swimming, running, and biking (and on any given day, needs to decide whether to balance between them or emphasize one type of exercise), people need social support on top of personal efforts. In their goal system, these are all means to achieving their goal and they can either compensate or complement between them.

References