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Motivational Selectivity Prospectively Predicts Couples' Realization of Their Goal to Have a  
Child

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### Abstract

Developmental theories have emphasized that motivational selectivity – focusing on a few goals instead of “wanting it all” – regulates development in individuals, dyads, or groups. We provide first evidence that this motivational strategy predicts an objective, goal-related developmental outcome years later. We followed up on initially childless couples in which both partners had reported the goal of starting a family within the next three and a half years. At baseline, partners reported on their general behavioral tendency to prioritize goals of particular importance in their partnership (i.e., their motivational selectivity). Three and a half years later, 50% of the couples had realized the goal to have a child. The higher the couples’ initial motivational-selectivity scores had been, the more likely they were to have indeed started a family, controlling for other potential predictors of child-bearing. These findings suggest that motivational selectivity meaningfully characterizes social entities like couples, and regulates their development.

*Keywords:* motivational selectivity, developmental regulation, relationships, goals

## Motivational Selectivity Prospectively Predicts Couples' Realization of Their Goal to Have a

### Child

A young person who is about to graduate from college is likely to think about the immediate future: Will he or she start a family, pursue an academic career, or join a friend's company? Will some of these ideas have to be postponed, or discarded altogether? Thinking about the future is central for human development, as it directs people's attention and guides their actions (Riediger & Freund, 2006). A person's future orientation is, for example, reflected in his or her personal goals (Pervin, 1989), which are mental representations of states or outcomes that this person wishes to attain, maintain, or avoid in the future (e.g., to quit smoking, have a baby, or travel to a foreign country). Developmental research proposes that the question of whether or not such goals are attained by the individual may partly depend on *selectivity*, which guides and catalyzes human development in the face of a multitude of potential developmental pathways and a finitude of resources needed to pursue these (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Heckhausen, 1999; Staudinger, Freund, Linden, & Maas, 1999). Realizing personal goals requires the investment of limited resources, such as time, money, or effort. The number of potential goals, or developmental options, however, typically exceeds an individual's available resources. Consequently, *motivational selectivity* – focusing on a few goals while rejecting others – has been proposed to provide direction and to channel development along selected pathways (e.g., Freund & Baltes, 2000). Motivational selectivity is thus seen as an important prerequisite for the attainment of selected goals.

Empirical evidence supporting this claim has so far focused on short-term outcomes of developmental regulation in individuals (Riediger & Freund, 2006). The present study extends this focus in two aspects. First, there is no longitudinal study to our knowledge that has investigated the long-term developmental implications of motivational selectivity. In the current longitudinal study, we expanded the time perspective under study to multiple years to

investigate the association of motivational selectivity with a future developmental outcome. Second, we consider the notion that taking into account individuals' involvement in dyads or groups may contribute to understanding the developmental-regulatory functions of motivational selectivity (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1999). For example, couples, teams, or organizations may negotiate shared goals and collaborate to attain them (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). In the present study, we investigated motivational selectivity in romantic partnerships. Here, motivational selectivity can take the form of both partners negotiating shared priorities for the goals that they, as a couple, want to attain in the future (e.g., to have a child), and of their abandoning alternative developmental options that would distract resources from those focal goals (e.g., to travel extensively or to promote one's career). Our aim in this study was to investigate whether a couple's tendency to jointly engage in motivational selectivity indeed shapes the long-term future development of the couple's life. We did so by using an observable developmental outcome, namely, the attainment of the shared goal to start a family.

Motivational selectivity may be particularly important when a couple faces a situation of increased resource demands but only limited resource availability (Young, Baltes, & Pratt, 2007). A prime example of such a developmental challenge is a couple's transition to parenthood. The time window for starting a family typically coincides with a phase of intense career development, and raising children while building a career often results in competing role demands (B. B. Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003; Wierda-Boer, Gerris, & Vermulst, 2009). As a result, dual-earner couples starting a family may have to postpone, compromise, or turn down other developmental options, for example, in the work or leisure domain (Steinmetz, Frese, & Schmidt, 2008; Wiese & Freund, 2000). If the partners acknowledge the necessity to set clear priorities, they can jointly make concrete decisions about alternative goals that they need to compromise in the interest of starting a family. For example, partners may postpone the goal to start their own business for the sake of starting a family soon. We therefore

hypothesized that couples' general tendency for motivational selectivity would predict a particular goal-related outcome, namely, their future success in attaining their goal of having a child. To test this hypothesis, we recruited initially childless couples who all shared the goal of starting a family within the next 3.5 years. We hypothesized that initial measures of the couples' motivational selectivity would prospectively predict couples' likelihood of realizing a shared goal – starting a family – in the near future.

## Method

### Participants

With the aim of investigating a sample of initially childless couples who all shared the goal to have a child in the near future, we recruited  $N = 54$  heterosexual couples (108 persons) whose demographic characteristics suggested a comparatively high chance of wanting to start a family soon. Couples were recruited from the greater Berlin area in Germany. Recruitment criteria were that participants were within the average age span for the transition to parenthood, cohabitating, and still childless. We only considered participants who had graduated from high school or a higher educational institution, as educational status is related to the onset of parenthood (Billari & Philipov, 2004). Participants were 23 to 39.5 years of age ( $M = 29.4$ ;  $SD = 3.6$ ), and had been together between 1.5 and 12.8 years ( $M = 5.3$ ;  $SD = 2.6$ ). Only a minority of the couples was married ( $n = 9$  couples, 17%) although all couples cohabitated, which reflects a typical style of living for younger adults in Germany (German Federal Statistical Office, 2011). Reflecting the diverse Berlin population,  $N = 93$  participants were German citizens,  $N = 10$  participants were citizens of other European countries, and  $N = 5$  participants were citizens of other non-European countries. All participants spoke fluent German. At the first measurement occasion, we asked both partners, independently of each other, "Do you want to have children?" If this was confirmed, we also asked them when they planned the birth of their first child. In eleven couples, at least one of the partners reported

that they did not want children at all, six couples did not plan to have a child within the time interval covered by the study, but only in the more distant future, and seven couples were already expecting a baby. These couples were excluded from the analyses reported below. In the remaining 30 couples, both partners independently reported the wish to have a child within the time interval covered by the study. Of these, 24 couples could be reached again three and a half years later. These 24 couples (= 48 persons) were included in the longitudinal analyses reported below.

Visual inspection of the descriptive statistics and a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) suggested that none of the variables assessed at T1 were systematically associated with couples' dropout at T2. The six couples who had dropped out were comparable to the core sample regarding their age (core sample:  $M = 27.2$  years at T1,  $SD = 2.9$ ; dropouts:  $M = 30.2$ ,  $SD = 4.3$ ,  $p = .26$ , partial  $\epsilon^2 = .05$ ) and their relationship duration (core sample:  $M = 4.8$  years at T1;  $SD = 2.6$ ; dropouts:  $M = 5.0$ ;  $SD = 2.5$ ;  $p = .85$ , partial  $\epsilon^2 = .00$ ). The couples' dropout was also not systematically related to our measure of motivational selectivity (that we will introduce next; core sample:  $M = 7.3$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ; dropouts:  $M = 6.4$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ;  $p = .44$ , partial  $\epsilon^2 = .02$ ).

### Procedure and Measures

**Motivational selectivity at T1.** The study comprised two assessment occasions. At the first (T1), both partners of a couple participated in a questionnaire session. Partners worked independently and could neither see each other nor communicate while working on the assessment instruments. They provided demographic information (age, relationship duration, marital status, and occupation), indicated whether they wanted to have children, and if so, when they planned to have their first child. After this, motivational selectivity was assessed using the 12-item selectivity subscale of the SOC questionnaire in German (Selection, Optimization, and Compensation; Freund & Baltes, 2002). To assess participants' perceptions of the couples' (rather than of the individuals') selectivity, we slightly modified

the wording of the items (e.g., by using “we” instead of “I”). Each item describes a general behavioral tendency that is in accord with the principle of motivational selectivity (the target; e.g., “To achieve a particular goal, we are willing to abandon other goals,”) and an alternative strategy (the distractor, e.g. “Just to achieve a particular goal, we are not willing to abandon other goals”). Importantly, all items described general goal-related strategies, without referring to the goal of starting a family in particular. Participants indicated which of the two strategies best described their typical behavior as a couple. The number of target responses chosen served as the indicator of perceived motivational selectivity ( $M = 7.3$ ;  $SD = 2.9$ ; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .82$ ; pairwise intraclass correlation [ICC;  $n = 24$ ] =  $.63$ ,  $Z = 3.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ). At the end of the session, participants evaluated their relationship satisfaction (Relationship Assessment Scale; Hendrick, 1988; 7 items, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ , ICC [ $n = 24$ ] =  $.71$ ,  $Z = 3.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ; German translation by Hassebrauck, 1991), and their interpersonal closeness (Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; 1 graphical item, ICC [ $n = 24$ ] =  $.63$ ,  $Z = 3.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ).<sup>2</sup>

**Realization of the goal to have a child at T2.** About three and a half years later (range: 3.4–3.7 years,  $M = 3.6$ ;  $SD = .06$ ), we conducted a telephone interview with one of the partners who reported on the couples’ parental status. Of the 24 couples who had consensually reported wanting to start a family within the next 3.5 years at T1,  $n = 12$  couples had attained this goal at T2 in that they either had at least one child ( $n = 9$  couples), or were currently expecting their first child ( $n = 3$  couples). Still childless couples were asked whether they had been trying to become pregnant to detect possible cases of involuntary childlessness. One couple confirmed this, which we considered in the control analyses described below.

## Results

To investigate whether initially obtained reports of motivational selectivity were predictive of participants’ likelihood to realize their wish for a child, we performed a logistic regression in SPSS 16.0, including all couples in which both partners had reported the goal of

having a child soon at T1 ( $n = 48$  persons, forming 24 couples). The outcome variable was whether these couples had realized this goal after about 3.5 years or not (coded 0/1). Motivational selectivity as measured at T1 (averaged across both partners' reports, thus obtaining one dyadic mean score per couple;  $N = 24$  couples) served as predictor variable. In line with our predictions, the analyses revealed that couples with higher scores in motivational selectivity were more likely to attain their goal to have a child (mean selectivity scores for childless couples: 6.00, mean selectivity scores for parents: 8.54;  $B = .71$  [ $SE = .31$ ], odds-ratio = 2.02,  $p < .05$ ; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = .40$ ).<sup>3</sup> Put differently, couples who had started a family by T2 were characterized by comparatively high mean scores of motivational selectivity, as assessed about 3.5 years earlier.

In-depth control analyses showed that these results were not attributable to a host of potential rival variables. We repeated the logistic regression while controlling for several variables that may be associated with the onset of parenthood, namely the couples' relationship duration, as well as the partners' mean age, relationship satisfaction, and interpersonal closeness. We furthermore controlled for the couples' financial independence as a proxy to the partners' career statuses (coded 0/1;  $n = 13$  of the couples had still depended on financial support from others at T1, whereas the remaining eleven couples were already earning their livelihood, with at least one partner being in employment). The effect of motivational selectivity predicting the realization of the goal to start a family remained robust when controlling for all these variables ( $B = .70$ , [ $SE = .31$ ], odds-ratio = 2.02,  $p < .05$ ; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = .40$ ), whereas none of the control variables were significant (all  $p > .23$ ).

We also considered the possible case of involuntary childlessness. At T2, one couple reported that they had already been trying for a baby, but had been unable to conceive, thus a potential case of infertility. We therefore repeated all analyses while excluding this particular couple, which did not change the results. Taken together, only one predictor was

meaningfully related to the couples' later success in starting a family – their motivational selectivity.

In an additional follow-up analysis, we considered the partners' individual perceptions of motivational selectivity by distinguishing between a dyadic maximum score for each couple (provided by the partner who endorsed the couples' motivational selectivity more than the other partner) and a dyadic minimum score (provided by the partner who endorsed the couples' motivational selectivity less than the other partner). In eight couples, the maximum score was provided by the female partner, and in 12 couples, by the male partner (in the remaining four cases, the partners' scores were equal).<sup>4</sup> We then implemented a logistic path model in Mplus 16.0, again modeling the likelihood of realizing the goal to have a child (coded 0/1), while entering the maximum and minimum scores as simultaneous predictors. We allowed for a correlation between the two predictors (i.e., between romantic partners' scores). The effect of the maximum motivational-selectivity score, while controlling for the minimum score, was significant ( $B = .90$  [ $SE = .45$ ], odds-ratio = 2.47,  $p < .05$ ; Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2$  for this model = .50). In contrast, the effect of the minimum motivational-selectivity score, while controlling for the maximum score, was not significant ( $B = .05$  [ $SE = .25$ ],  $p = .84$ ). This means that the realization of the goal to start a family was more likely if couples had at least one partner with a high motivational-selectivity score (irrespective of the other partner's score). Figure 1 illustrates this path model.

-- Figure 1 about here --

## Discussion

This study provides first evidence that motivational selectivity – the general behavioral tendency to selectively invest resources into few prioritized goals – longitudinally predicts an objective goal-related developmental outcome over the course of multiple years. We took a novel, namely dyadic perspective on the phenomenon of motivational selectivity,

investigating romantic partners' perceptions of their motivational selectivity as a couple. We followed up over time on initially childless heterosexual couples who had shared the goal of having a child in the near future. In line with our predictions, the higher the couples' initial scores in motivational selectivity had been, the more likely they were to actually realize their goal to start a family in the subsequent 3.5 years. This result was not accounted for by differences in several rival predictors, such as chronological age, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, or interpersonal closeness. The association between motivational selectivity and outcome was unrelated to the partners' financial independence, and was also obtained when excluding one case of involuntary childlessness.

Following up on these results, we investigated the role of individual contributions of both partners' perceptions of motivational selectivity for the developmental outcome (i.e., starting a family later on). This analysis revealed that couples' later realization of their wish for a child was predicted by couples' having at least one partner high in perceptions of motivational selectivity, whereas the respective score of the second partner (with the lower score) was irrelevant. This implies that although high dyadic motivational-selectivity scores across both partners were predictive of starting a family, this effect was driven by the partner of a couple who had provided the higher score among the partners. Couples in which both partners provided medium scores in motivational selectivity were thus less likely to start a family than couples in which one partner scored high (and the other partner, low) on motivational selectivity. One possible interpretation of this finding is that motivational selectivity does not necessarily need to be salient to both partners to regulate the couple's development. Instead, it may suffice that only one of two partners endorses motivational selectivity and takes actions that are in line with this strategy. This partner may, for example, be particularly likely to initiate mutual negotiations regarding the couples' goals, thereby promoting the chance that the couple jointly discusses and sets priorities regarding their shared future.

Taken together, these results lend further support to the proposition that motivational selectivity may be among the mechanisms that regulate development (e.g. Carstensen et al., 1999; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Heckhausen, 1999; Staudinger et al., 1999). The present work also provides first empirical evidence for the theoretical notion that motivational variables may not only characterize individual persons, but also dyads or groups (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1999), and that these factors are meaningfully related to goal-related future outcomes in the shared development of social entities such as couples. Important life decisions, such as the transition to parenthood, are likely to be influenced by many factors, of which motivational factors may be but one (Lang & Heckhausen, 2006). The probability and timing of having children have been linked to various factors, among them genetic dispositions (Kirk et al., 2001), education and religious affiliation (Kirk et al., 2001), personality traits (Hutteman, Bleidorn, Penke, & Denissen, 2013; Jokela, Alvergne, Pollet, & Lummaa, 2011), or family values and expectations about parenthood (Jansen & Kalmijn, 2002; Liefbroer, 2005). Despite the variety of such potential factors of influence, the motivational factor of motivational selectivity reliably predicted the future realization of couples' goals to start a family in our study.

To our knowledge, the current study is the first to approach the question of long-term developmental outcomes of motivational selectivity by investigating an objective, goal-related outcome. However, the present study also has some important limitations. The selection criteria for the current participants created a small and rather homogeneous sample, and future replications of the present initial findings using larger and more heterogeneous samples would be desirable. Such research could also explore potential qualifications of the reported effects by investigating the role of additional factors such as participants' education (which was held constant in the present study). Furthermore, our results are based on correlational data, which requires a more differentiated discussion of causality than do insights gained from experiments. Several assets of the present study design support the causal inferences implied

by our theoretical framework. For example, the longitudinal design allowed us to assess the suggested cause (motivational selectivity) before the suggested outcome (the later likelihood of realizing the goal to start a family), and these successively assessed measures were statistically associated (Mill, 1843; Rutter, 2007). Moreover, causal conclusions from observational data require careful consideration of alternative explanations for the reported effects (Foster, 2010; Mill, 1843; Rutter, 2007). In keeping with this imperative, we held some plausible factors of influence constant (all couples were in the potential age range for starting a family, and all had a relatively high level of education), and statistically controlled for other plausible predictors that may have accounted for the association of motivational selectivity and goal attainment (i.e., age, relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, interpersonal closeness, and financial independence). Taken together, the present study design thus provides multiple arguments for the validity of our causal assumptions. However, although the employed statistical models reflect associations between variables, they do not capture potential causal relationships (Chen & Pearl, 2012). A test of causal inferences can only be provided by counterfactual considerations (what would have happened had the couples' initial motivational selectivity been different?), or, as an approximation to the counterfactual, by experimental manipulation (Chen & Pearl, 2012; Rutter, 2007). Reflecting a typical quandary in developmental psychology, neither of these options was feasible for the phenomenon and sample under study. Therefore, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that yet other variables that we had not assessed may have caused the reported effect. For example, the participants' initial self-reports on their motivational selectivity may have been informed by past decisions that the couple had already made. Such past decisions could influence the partners' judgments on how effective they are in resolving resource conflicts (Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson, & Zazanis, 1995), while also providing the cornerstone for starting a family later on. An intriguing open question for future research thus pertains to the mechanisms that relate dyadic selectivity to dyadic-goal attainment. We propose that dyadic

selectivity supports decision-making processes involved in starting a family, as this strategy may encourage the partners to engage in mutual negotiations about the future, and to compromise less important goals in the interest of achieving prioritized ones. However, additional research is needed to directly support these assumptions.

In sum, we found that romantic partners' initial perceptions of their motivational selectivity prospectively predicted an objective developmental outcome in the future, namely, the couples' later likelihood to actually realize the shared goal of having a child. Our results support the notion that motivational selectivity may not only be an adaptive strategy that regulates the development of individuals, but may also channel and promote development as it unfolds in dyadic contexts. The present study suggests that this perspective adds to understanding human development and thus poses a promising framework for future research.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In three of the couples who had dropped out, and in two couples from the core sample, at least one partner held a non-German citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> ICCs were calculated with the procedure introduced by Gonzalez & Griffin (1997).

Distinguishability was tested according to recommendations by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006).

<sup>3</sup> As recommended by Tabachnick & Fidell (2005), we carefully inspected the residual statistics to investigate if there were isolated couples that had an influence on the model. The values of Cook's distance (all  $< 1$ ) suggested that there were no influential cases. Supporting this conclusion, the leverage statistics ( $M = .08$ ;  $SD = .02$ ) corresponded to the calculated expected value of .08. However, the standardized residual for one couple was rather high ( $> 2.5$ ), and the DFbeta for this couple was also higher than desirable ( $> 1$ ). This couple belonged to the group of couples that had achieved the goal of starting a family at T2, but they had reported unusually low motivational-selectivity scores at T1 (partners' average = 4.5; theoretical range: 0-12). When excluding this couple from the analysis, this did not change the results.

<sup>4</sup> Entering both men's and women's scores as simultaneous predictors seems an obvious alternative approach. However, this approach was not warranted because men and women did not differ in motivational selectivity, neither regarding their means ( $t = 0.64$  [23],  $p = .53$ ), nor regarding their variances (as tested following recommendations by Kenny et al., 2006); correlation of dyadic-sum and dyadic-difference scores:  $r = .21$ ,  $p = .32$ ). The couples therefore should be considered empirically indistinguishable for the present analyses (Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny et al., 2006).

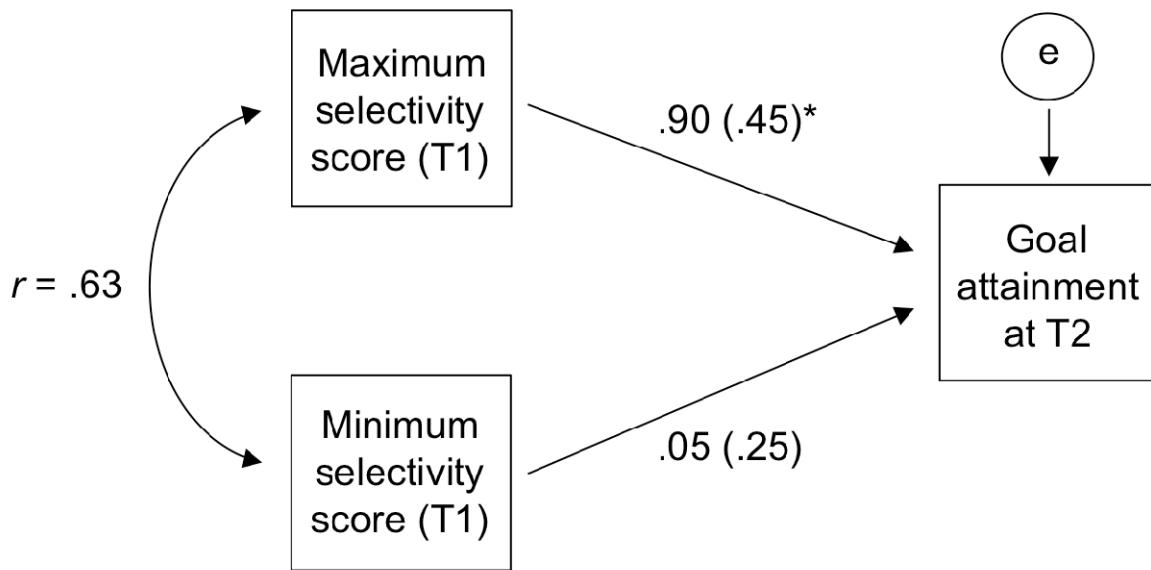
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*Figure 1.* Path model predicting the realization of the goal to have a child at T2 (coded 0/1) with the partners' individual motivational-selectivity scores as measured at T1. The B estimates and standard errors (in brackets) are given on the arrows (\*  $p < .05$ ; odds-ratio = 2.47, Nagelkerke's pseudo- $R^2 = .50$ ). The parameter  $r$  pertains to the model-implied correlation between romantic partners' scores; e pertains to error.