Article

I-Through-We: How Supportive Social Relationships Facilitate Personal Growth

**David S. Lee[1,2], Oscar Ybarra[1], Richard Gonzalez[1],
and Phoebe Ellsworth[1]**

Abstract

Personal growth is usually considered an outcome of *intrapersonal* processes—personal resources residing within the person. Comparatively, little research has examined the *interpersonal* processes underlying personal growth. We investigated how one interpersonal factor—people's relationships with others—influences personal growth. Study 1 showed that brief reminders of a supportive (vs. nonsupportive) other led people to choose a job that promoted personal growth over one that offered a higher salary. Moreover, feelings of self-confidence from thinking about a supportive (vs. nonsupportive) other mediated personal growth. Extending these results, Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that people's perceptions of how supportive their close others are predicted personal growth in two distinct cultures with varying emphasis on individual (vs. collective) growth. Consistent with Study 1's findings, the results were also mediated by feelings of self-confidence. These findings suggest that the link between supportive relationships and personal growth may reflect a general process.

Personal growth refers to the tendency to actively strive to learn, grow, and improve as a person (Dykman, 1998; Ryff, 1989; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). While scholars vary on how they define this construct, an orientation toward personal growth is generally associated with higher psychological well-being (Bowlby, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Maslow, 1987; Ryff, 1989). Also, in many theoretical perspectives, an individual who is growth oriented is often considered to be optimally functioning (Bowlby, 1988; Maslow, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

What factors propel an individual toward personal growth? Conventional wisdom suggests that personal growth can be achieved by changing the "self"—for example, by being more motivated, having more willpower, or improving goal-management skills. Many self-help books urge individuals to "change" themselves through hard work, dedication, and motivation. Demand is high for seminars conducted by life coaches who instill in their students the idea that success comes from "within" (Robbins, 1992).

Likewise, much psychological research in the past decades has approached personal growth as an outcome of *intrapersonal* processes. For example, it is argued that people are likely to achieve their goals if they are motivated, adopt a growth mind-set, form implementation intentions, have sufficient skills or self-regulatory resources, or can delay gratification (e.g., Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007; Deci &

Ryan, 1985; Dweck, 1986; Gollwitzer, 1999; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). More precisely, factors that directly contribute to personal growth include whether the individual endorses learning goals over performance goals, whether the person is growth-seeking oriented versus validation-seeking oriented, whether the individual is curious enough, or able to learn from challenging life crises (Aspelmeier & Kerns, 2003; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dykman, 1998; Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Collectively, these studies highlight important intrapersonal processes that help individuals to grow.

However, although the construct of personal growth targets individuals, a singular focus on the individual can lead to an oversimplified story of personal growth. It could be said, for example, that "Josh did well on his exam because he was extremely motivated" or "Mike failed his exam because he lacked willpower." Attributing success or failure to a person's internal qualities without taking into account the contexts in which the person pursues his or her goals (e.g., Josh

[1]University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA
[2]The Ohio State University, Columbus, USA

Corresponding Author:
David S. Lee, The Ohio State University, 1827 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210, USA.
Email: lee.4152@osu.edu

had a better teacher than Mike) can paint an incomplete or misleading picture about the person and the behavior; it explains effort solely as a function of a person's internal qualities and intrapersonal processes, which is unlikely to be sufficient in helping us understand something as important and dynamic as personal growth. In addition, because much of learning and growing is closely tied to a person's social environment (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), more research examining the *interpersonal* factors that enable personal growth is needed (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & van-Dellen, 2015). Thus, the present research investigates how the nature of people's relationships with others influences personal growth.

I-Through-We Perspective: Supportive Relationships Foster Personal Growth

Imagine Julie, a graduate student aspiring to become a successful researcher. To grow and develop as a successful researcher, Julie will likely need a great deal of career advice and guidance from her mentors. Julie may also need emotional support from friends and family who can comfort her and validate her self-worth in the wake of setbacks, such as struggling with classes or rejected manuscripts. Julie's case illustrates a prominent theme in personal growth: A person's growth depends not only on individual capabilities but also on his or her relational network and social capital. Throughout this article, we refer to this idea as the *I-through-We Perspective*: There is no personal growth without the individual, but growth is embedded in a social context that facilitates a person's relevant attitudes and capacities.

Decades of research have shown that people benefit from positive social connections (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Trivers, 1971). For instance, the provision of financial aid, material resources, or services to those in need allows them to cope with problems in life (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000). Having many social ties allows people to have more access to novel ideas and opportunities because social networks facilitate the distribution and sharing of information (Granovetter, 1973; Ruef, 2002). Moreover, recent studies have shown that social connections can positively influence people's ability to process available information (Ybarra et al., 2008; Ybarra, Winkielman, Yeh, Burnstein, & Kavanagh, 2011). In addition, positive social connections promote mental and physical health (Gladstone, Parker, Malhi, & Wilhelm, 2007; House et al., 1988; Uchino, 2006). Finally, supportive relationships provide emotional benefits such as feelings of security (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Crockenberg, 1981; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Ybarra, Lee, & Gonzalez, 2012) and help alleviate anxiety (Gump & Kulik, 1997; Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien, & Jacobs, 2004). Thus, supportive relationships may enable people to persevere and strive for growth.

The Role of Self-Confidence in the I-Through-We Perspective

How exactly should supportive relationships promote personal growth? Although there may be different mechanisms, in this research we propose self-confidence as one factor that explains the link between supportive relationships and personal growth. By self-confidence we refer to a positive appraisal of one's competence, skills, or ability in dealing with a wide array of tasks, demands, and challenges (Crocker & Major, 1989; Instone, Major, & Bunker, 1983; Lenney, 1977; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

According to theory in social support (Cohen et al., 2000), the perception that others can and will provide necessary resources can bolster one's perceived ability to cope with imposed demands. Thus, supportive relationships (or reminders of a supportive other) should lead to increased feelings of self-confidence because people believe that they can rely on their close others for emotional or instrumental support.

To learn and grow, people need to explore their environment and boundaries, to welcome learning experiences and challenges outside of their comfort zone, and to persevere (Bowlby, 1988; Dweck, 1986; Dykman, 1998; Maslow, 1987; Ryff, 1989). Feelings of self-confidence, then, should help people form the belief that they can be successful in any endeavor necessary in their pursuit of growth. Much research has shown that believing in oneself can lead to many benefits related to growth including increased effort and persistence (Bandura, 1977, 1982; Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, we predict that supportive relationships (compared with nonsupportive ones) or their reminders should lead to increased feelings of self-confidence that enable individuals to pursue personal growth. In contrast, people without such relationships (or when reminded that they cannot rely on others) should find no basis for self-confidence that could be instrumental to their personal growth. Furthermore, given the fundamental human motive to build positive social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Trivers, 1971), we argue that the benefits derived from supportive social relationships and their effect on personal growth should show similar patterns in different cultures.

From our perspective, although self-confidence is closely related to other constructs such as self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1977) or self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965), it has distinct elements that should uniquely contribute to promoting personal growth. First, self-efficacy generally refers to an individual's belief that he or she can perform well in a *specific* domain: A person high in academic self-efficacy believes in his or her ability to perform well in specific academic tasks (e.g., doing well on the math test), but not necessarily in other domains that could be relevant to growth (e.g., cooking). Self-confidence, in contrast, is concerned with a broader belief in the self (e.g., "I believe I can succeed."), and thus is more domain-general (Crocker & Major, 1989). Given that

personal growth goes beyond accomplishing specific tasks and includes learning broadly and a willingness to place oneself in a larger array of circumstances, it should be more closely aligned with the construct of self-confidence. This is also consistent with research on the matching principle, which argues for a match in the level of abstractness in the constructs posited to be related to each other (Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Second, although self-esteem is generally associated with positive psychological functioning (see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003), much research also shows that people high in self-esteem can exhibit behavioral tendencies that can undermine personal growth, including being defensive and aggressive toward the person who provides them negative feedback (but who can potentially help them grow; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; also see Crocker & Park, 2004). Moreover, people high in self-esteem, when they anticipate failure, may elect not to put themselves in situations that contribute to learning or growth (e.g., solving a difficult math problem) to preemptively protect their self-esteem (Dweck, 1986). Thus, it is unclear how self-esteem would contribute to personal growth.

A Possible Link Between Social Factors and Personal Growth

Extant research is suggestive of the link between social factors and personal growth. For example, research on the Michelangelo phenomenon has highlighted how close partners (i.e., dyads) both promote or inhibit each other's ideal self and goal strivings (Righetti, Rusbult, & Finkenauer, 2010; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Stocker, & Wolf, 2005). Similarly, Brunstein, Dangelmayer, and Schultheiss (1996) showed that people's ability to meet their personal goals (e.g., fitness) depended on the extent to which their romantic partners supported those goals. Moreover, priming a close other (e.g., mother) can activate goals associated with that person (e.g., academics) and increase motivation and performance when those goals are endorsed by the primed person (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003). An interpretation of these findings is that people are motivated to achieve goals their close others support and endorse, in part to make them proud (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

Other studies have demonstrated that secure attachment styles are positively associated with exploratory behaviors such as seeking novel information or engaging in a novel activity (Aspelmeier & Kerns, 2003; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Mikulincer, 1997). This is consistent with the perspective that people with secure attachments believe that their close others provide them with a "secure base" from which they can explore their environment, and a "safe haven" to retreat to for care and support when stressors arise (Bowlby, 1988; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Hazan & Shaver, 1990).

Although the reviewed studies are suggestive of a connection between interpersonal factors and personal growth, they raise issues that need to be addressed. For example, much of extant research on attachment has emphasized the importance of secure feelings in promoting exploration, that is, the belief that an attachment figure will be responsive leads to feelings of security, which allows individuals to feel safe enough to explore their environment (e.g., Feeney, 2004). However, given that growth can occur even when people do not feel secure in their relationship (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Tedeschi et al., 1998), it is necessary to investigate whether there are additional ways in which supportive relationships can promote personal growth. Moreover, whereas much of the attachment research has focused on the individual's willingness to explore one's environment, the present research is concerned with the construct of personal growth. Although exploration may serve the function of providing people with an opportunity to grow, it only reflects one facet of personal growth. In addition to exploring their environment, people may need to persist or challenge themselves to grow (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dykman, 1998). Taken together, the proposed link between supportive relationships and personal growth needs empirical evidence.

In addition, while work on close relationships and goal-pursuit shows that close others can influence specific goal-pursuits, it is unclear whether the close others champion the goal-pursuer or the goal itself (Brunstein et al., 1996; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Rusbult et al., 2009). Interestingly, in the latter case, studies show that close others can actually undermine their partners' growth. For instance, Kappes and Shrout (2011) demonstrated that sometimes supportive others can have a "partner-achievement goal" or a personal goal for recipients' success, which can lead them to offer unhelpful support that undermines growth. In addition, because not all goal-pursuits are intended for growth, it is unclear whether the supposed benefits of supportive relationships would extend beyond the achievement of specific goals in specific domains to promoting personal growth more generally.

The Present Research

Building on these efforts, the present research examined whether supportive relationships promote a general orientation toward personal growth by enhancing self-confidence. To our knowledge, no studies have tested this model in one investigation using different methods and samples. Study 1 used an experimental approach to examine how supportive relationships promote personal growth. Moreover, to shed light on *how* supportive relationships influence personal growth, we examined how feelings of self-confidence may explain the link between supportive relationships and personal growth. Finally, we tested the generalizability of the present findings by examining the link between supportive

relationships and personal growth using large representative adult samples (Studies 2 and 3).

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to demonstrate the causal effect of supportive relationships on a behavioral indicator of personal growth, which we operationalized as motivation to pursue an important growth goal. Specifically, we wanted to examine experimentally how the proposed benefits of supportive relationships would translate to behavioral intentions. Moreover, we sought to extend previous research on close relationships and goal-pursuit (Brunstein et al., 1996; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003) by testing for potential mechanisms that can explain the link between supportive relationships and personal growth. Specifically, people receive emotional, instrumental, and cognitive benefits from supportive relationships (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985). Reminders of such relationships, by bringing to mind the idea that one has others to rely on, should lead to feelings of self-confidence (Cohen et al., 2000). Given that personal growth involves exploring one's environment and confronting challenges (Ryff, 1989), we expected that reminders of a supportive (vs. nonsupportive or neutral) other would help people pursue a growth goal, and that increased feelings of self-confidence from thinking about a supportive other would mediate this link.

Participants

Two hundred thirty-one participants (111 females, M_{age} = 32.07 years) were recruited from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants were monetarily compensated for their responses to an online survey. Given the small to medium effect sizes observed in previous studies using the same manipulation (Ybarra et al., 2012), we sought to recruit about 65 participants in each condition. We oversampled to take into account the possibility that some participants might not follow instructions for the writing manipulation.

Procedure and Materials

To bring to mind supportive (vs. nonsupportive) relationships in participants, we used a writing manipulation from prior work (Ybarra et al., 2012). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: supportive relationship (*n* = 75), nonsupportive relationship (*n* = 82), or neutral relationship (*n* = 74) conditions. Twenty-nine participants who wrote about a relationship not assigned to them were excluded from the analysis, leaving 202 participants (supportive relationship, *n* = 74; nonsupportive relationship, *n* = 60; neutral relationship, *n* = 68). The majority of the excluded participants were in the nonsupportive relationship condition; they mostly wrote about a person to whom they felt close and liked instead of writing about a person they did not feel close to and with whom they did not feel comfortable.

Participants were told that the researchers were interested in "how well people can visualize others around them." In the supportive (nonsupportive) other condition, participants were to think about

> a relationship that is very important to you in which you felt you were (not) close to the other person and you felt comfortable (uncomfortable) depending on the other person. In this relationship you didn't (would) often worry about being abandoned by the other person.

Participants then wrote down the initial of that person's name and described their thoughts and feelings regarding the individual. Participants in the control condition wrote about a person whom they "do not know very well (e.g., acquaintance) and to whom they do not have any strong feelings." The purpose of the latter two conditions was to provide a reference point to the proposed effects of supportive relationships on personal growth. To dissociate the manipulation from the main judgment task, participants completed a filler task in which they indicated the number of times they engaged in mundane activities in the past week (e.g., checking email, driving).

For the main judgment task, participants read a hypothetical scenario in which they were to choose between a higher paying job with high familiarity (Company A) and a lower paying job that required learning that would help their long-term career development (Company B). In this study, we operationalized personal growth as pursuing a job that helps a person learn and develop mastery (Company B) over a job that is familiar (Company A). To balance out the appeal of each job, we manipulated the amount of salary offered by each company. Participants read,

> Imagine that you are looking for a new job. After several interviews, two companies contact you with an offer:
>
> - Company A offers decent pay and you are familiar with the work you will be doing.
> - Company B offers a slightly lower salary than Company A and the work you will be doing requires some learning; however, the job will help your long-term career development.

Participants indicated which offer they would take. Given that mood can influence personal growth tendencies (e.g., Isen & Patrick, 1983; Maddux, 1995), we assessed how participants felt on a scale of 1 (*negative, sad, upset*) to 5 (*positive, happy, joyful*). After completing demographic questions, participants reported what they thought the study was about and received their compensation.

Results

We had two goals for this study. First, we examined the causal effect of supportive relationships on a behavioral indicator of personal growth. Second, we tested whether the link

between supportive relationships and personal growth is mediated by increased feelings of self-confidence from thinking about a supportive other. In the supportive other condition, 64.9% of participants selected Company B, whereas 40% of those in the nonsupportive other condition and 50% of those in the neutral other condition chose Company B (see Figure 1). We examined these effects further using logistic regression in which we submitted participants' job choice (coded 0 = *Company A*, 1 = *Company B*) as the dependent variable, with condition (recalled person) as the categorical predictor with three levels. We tested all possible pairwise contrasts and used a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons ($\alpha = .05 / 3 = .017$). Consistent with our prediction, compared with participants in the nonsupportive other condition, those in the supportive other condition were more likely to choose Company B ($b = 1.02$, odds ratio = 2.77, Wald coefficient = 8.06, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [1.37, 5.60], $p = .005$). There was no significant difference in the likelihood of choosing Company B for participants in the neutral other condition compared with those in the supportive other condition, $p = .074$, and also compared with participants in the nonsupportive other condition, $p = .26$. Controlling for mood did not alter the results, suggesting that the effect was driven by the supportive nature of participants' relationships rather than general positive mood.

Do feelings of self-confidence mediate the link between supportive relationships and personal growth? We hypothesized that *participants who were reminded of a supportive other (vs.* a nonsupportive or neutral other) would be more likely to choose a job that offered an opportunity to grow and develop mastery. In addition, we predicted that the belief that a supportive other can and will be responsive should lead to feelings of self-confidence (Cohen et al., 2000), which should help explain our finding. To test for mediation, two independent coders, blind to experimental condition and study hypotheses, were trained to rate participants' descriptions of their relationships on feelings of self-confidence using a 5-point scale (−2 = *not very self-confident*, 2 = *very self-confident*). Some examples of statements rated high in self-confidence include "[J] makes me feel like I can accomplish anything when he is around," and "This person is rock solid and dependable . . . there is a general ease and confidence that results from being around this person." Examples of statements rated low in self-confidence include "She makes me feel like whatever I do is never good enough," and "This person always made me feel inferior to them." Interrater reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .76$), so we averaged the scores across two raters ($M = 0.04$, $SD = 0.66$).

We tested the proposed mediating effect using a bootstrapping procedure for mediator models recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008). Analyses were conducted with the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012) using 5,000 bootstrap samples. First, relationship type (coded 1 = *supportive*, −1 = *nonsupportive*; excluding the neutral
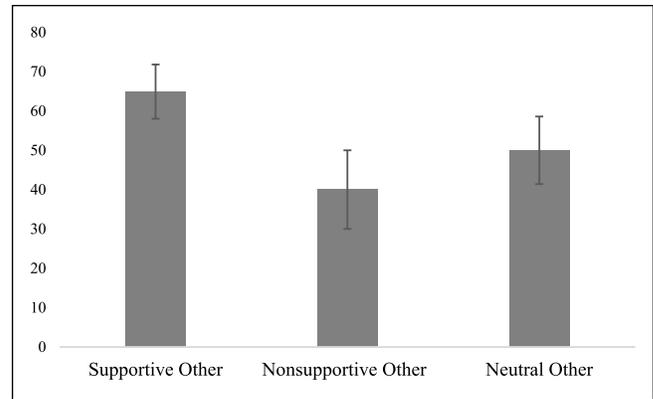
Figure 1. Percentage of participants who chose Company B (personal growth) over Company A.

condition) predicted self-confidence, $b = .42$, $SE = .06$, $t(132) = 6.94$, 95% CI = [.30, .54], and personal growth, Wald coefficient = 8.06, 95% CI = [.18, .73], $p = .005$. Furthermore, self-confidence predicted personal growth ($b = .71$, $SE = .31$, $Z = 2.29$, $p = .02$, 95% CI = [.10, 1.31]). A 5,000 bootstrap procedure revealed a significant indirect effect of relationship type on personal growth via self-confidence ($b = .30$, 95% CI = [.06, .65]). Because the CI does not include 0, this means that the effect of relationship type on personal growth was statistically mediated by self-confidence. Furthermore, the effect of relationship type on personal growth became nonsignificant once self-confidence was entered in the model ($b = .25$, $p = .23$, 95% CI = [−.16, .65]). Finally, the interaction between supportive relationships and self-confidence on personal growth was not statistically significant, Wald coefficient = .43, $p = .51$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support our hypothesis that supportive relationships serve as a base from which people can explore and grow. Specifically, participants who thought about a supportive (vs. nonsupportive) other were more willing to choose a job that promoted personal growth. Furthermore, this effect was mediated by increased feelings of self-confidence for those who thought about a supportive other. We have argued that these findings should occur given that the reminders of a supportive other should lead to feelings of self-confidence (e.g., Cohen et al., 2000), which enables the person to strive and to want to grow.

One limitation of our findings is that it is unclear what participants would have done with a higher salary from Company A. For example, it is possible that these participants viewed that earning more money could afford them other forms of personal growth (e.g., cooking lessons). Thus, in the next studies, we used a more established personal growth measure that does not suffer from this limitation. Second, the nonsignificant difference in the percentage of

the personal growth choice between the supportive relationship condition and the neutral other condition warrants further investigation. Our expectation was that to the extent that the recalled neutral other (e.g., acquaintance) is less supportive than a supportive other but more supportive (less inhibiting) than a nonsupportive other, we would expect an increasing relationship between the supportive nature of one's relationships and personal growth. However, it is possible that our control condition manipulation failed to help participants bring to mind such a person. Thus, to better test this possibility, in the next studies we measured the degree to which people find their relationships to be supportive.

Finally, having established a link between supportive relationships and personal growth, we next sought to generalize and test our findings using large representative samples. Although more representative of U.S. population than college samples or in-person convenience samples, there may be characteristics unique to MTurk workers that can potentially influence the link between supportive relationships and personal growth. Studies have found that compared with the general population, MTurk workers tend to be younger (about 30 years old), more educated, unemployed or underemployed, have lower income, and are less likely to live alone (see Goodman & Paolacci, 2017; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014, for reviews). Thus, to test whether the I-through-We perspective generalizes to people across different demographics, we used a large, nationally representative survey data set in Study 2.

Study 2

The main goal of Study 2 was to examine the link between supportive relationships and personal growth using a representative sample of adults. The large survey data set allowed us to assess the supportive nature of people's relationships with close others and measure personal growth broadly (described below). Given the emotional and cognitive benefits associated with having supportive relationships (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985), we expected supportive relationships to positively predict personal growth. Moreover, similar to Study 1, we hypothesized that feelings of self-confidence would mediate the link between supportive relationships and personal growth (Cohen et al., 2000). In our analyses, we included several control variables to assess the unique effects of supportive relationships on personal growth.

Method

Study population. The data for Study 2 came from the Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS II; Ryff et al., 2004-2006). The study respondents were healthy English-speaking participants (n = 4,963; due to missing responses, the samples in the different analyses ranged from 3,801 to 4,026). They were from the United States and were first interviewed as part of the National Survey of MIDUS in 1995 to 1996, and then recontacted to participate in MIDUS II as a follow-up study (response rates: 75%). The age range for participants was 28 to 84 years old (M = 55.4). Data consisted of various life topics and assessed a variety of variables including sociodemographic information and a comprehensive array of psychosocial factors and health assessments.

Predictor variable: Supportive relationships. Our predictor variable was participants' ratings of the supportiveness of their close network members (i.e., family and friends). Specifically, participants responded to eight items (four items each for family and friends) on a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *a lot*), with some examples being "How much does your family (do your friends) really care about you?" and "How much can you open up to them if you need to talk about your worries?" This scale was reliable (α = .85), so we averaged the items to create a composite *supportive relationships* variable, with higher scores reflecting the availability of more supportive relationships.

Dependent variable: Personal growth. Taken from Ryff (1989), the *personal growth* scale consisted of seven items (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*) dealing with a person's willingness to develop his or her potential and grow as a person. Example items included, "I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world" (reverse-coded) and "I am not interested in activities that will expand my horizons." The scores were averaged to generate an overall personal growth variable, with higher scores indicating more personal growth (α = .75).

Covariates. We controlled for relevant covariates, including demographic variables that can potentially influence personal growth (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Coan, 1977; Ryff, 1985, 1989). These were age (measured in years), highest level of education (on a scale; 1 = *some grade school*, 12 = *PhD, MD, etc.*), gender, current financial situation (0 = *the worst possible financial situation*, 10 = *the best possible financial situation*), and marital status (0 = *currently without a partner*, 1 = *currently with a partner*). Nonbinary covariates were entered as linear predictors.

In addition, we controlled for participants' physical health because severe health issues or physical impairments can interfere with a person's ability to achieve personal goals or even live independently. Participants' physical health was measured in two ways. One measure assessed *the number of visits to the doctor* in the past 12 months (a continuous variable with high scores reflecting more visits). The second measure dealt with *the difficulty with daily activity*, which assessed how much difficulty participants had performing various daily activities. Using a 4-point scale (1 = *a lot*, 4 = *not at all*), participants indicated how much their health limited their ability to engage in seven different daily activities (e.g., lifting or carrying groceries, climbing up stairs). These

scores were reverse-coded and averaged into one variable, with higher scores reflecting greater difficulty with daily activities ($\alpha = .94$).

Finally, we controlled for participants' *positive* and *negative affect* given the potential influence of mood on our dependent variables. For example, research has shown that positive mood is associated with higher self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1986) and higher motivation for many kinds of tasks (e.g., Isen & Patrick, 1983), whereas chronic negative mood is linked to low self-efficacy (e.g., Maddux, 1995) and a reduced sense of control over one's environment (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975). Using a 5-point scale (1 = *all of the time*, 5 = *none of the time*), participants indicated how frequently they experienced specific emotions in the past 30 days. Some examples included "in good spirits" and "full of life," "so sad nothing can cheer you up," and "hopeless." The items were reverse-coded and separately averaged into two variables, *positive affect* ($\alpha = .90$) and *negative affect* ($\alpha = .85$), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of each.

Mediator: Self-confidence. Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "In general, I feel confident and positive about myself (reverse-coded)," on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*). They also indicated how well the word "self-confident (reverse-coded)" described them on a 4-point scale (1 = *a lot*, 4 = *not at all*). These items were correlated ($r = .58$). We standardized and averaged them to generate an overall self-confidence index ($\alpha = .73$).

Results and Discussion

To test our hypothesis, we regressed personal growth on the supportive relationships variable including all the covariates mentioned above. Consistent with our hypothesis, the results indicated that the supportive relationships variable was a significant predictor of personal growth, $b = .39$, $p < .001$, even after controlling for covariates.[1] Thus, people who report their relationships to be more supportive also showed higher willingness to grow personally.

We conducted a mediational analysis using the same bootstrapping procedure as in Study 1 (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008) First, supportive relationships predicted self-confidence, $b = .31$, $t(3815) = 13.15$, $p < .0001$, 95% CI = [.27, .36], and personal growth, $b = .39$, $t(3815) = 14.05$, $p < .0001$, 95% CI = [.34, .45]. Furthermore, self-confidence predicted personal growth, $b = .46$, $t(3814) = 26.71$, $p < .0001$, 95% CI = [.43, .50]. A 5,000 bootstrap sample, using Hayes's (2012) PROCESS, revealed a significant indirect effect of relationship type on personal growth via self-confidence ($b = .15$, 95% CI = [.12, .17]). Because the CI excluded 0, this means that the effect of supportive relationships on personal growth was statistically mediated by

self-confidence. Finally, the interaction between supportive relationships and self-confidence on personal growth was not statistically significant, $b = .04$, $p = .11$.

Consistent with our perspective, people who reported their close others to be more supportive tended to exhibit more personal growth tendencies in a large nationally representative sample. Moreover, similar to the results from Study 1, this finding was mediated by feelings of self-confidence. Study 2 provides a conceptual replication of the experiment in Study 1.

Nevertheless, studies suggest that Americans tend to be more individualistic and value personal growth more than individuals from other cultures, such as those from East Asia (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Thus, the question we ask next is this: Will our findings apply to a more collectivistic culture that emphasizes collective strivings? In the final study we thus tested the generalizability of the I-through-We perspective with a sample of participants from Japan.

Study 3

Testing the I-Through-We Perspective With a Non-Western Culture

According to Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010), much psychological research has relied on samples drawn entirely from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. Because of the specific characteristics of these samples, they argue that one must be cautious in interpreting the generalizability of particular phenomena biased toward a single subpopulation (i.e., WEIRD sample). Likewise, most of the available theoretical work and empirical evidence relevant to personal growth has come from studying people in Western societies, which strongly emphasize individual (relative to collective) growth. Thus, although in a limited fashion, we aimed to empirically test the robustness and generality of the proposed I-through-We perspective by using a large representative adult sample from a non-Western culture.

Specifically, research has shown that people in other parts of the world (e.g., East Asia) tend to have more collectivistic tendencies (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Thus, it is unclear whether the I-through-We perspective should generalize to cultures that put more emphasis on collective rather than personal growth. Finding a similar pattern in a more collectivistic Eastern culture would suggest that the I-through-We perspective potentially captures a more general process of human functioning, helping to further underscore the importance of social relationships in personal growth. Thus, in Study 3, we sought to test the hypothesis that supportive relationships will predict personal growth, even in a culture that puts less emphasis on individual growth. Moreover, as in Study 2, we expected this pattern to be mediated by feelings of self-confidence.

Method

Study population and description. The data for Study 3 came from the Survey of Midlife Development in Japan (MIDJA; Ryff, Kitayama, Karasawa, Markus, Kawakami, & Coe, 2008), which paralleled the MIDUS II survey (Ryff et al., 2004-2006). The survey data are based on a probability sample of adults from Tokyo, Japan (n = 1,027; response rate: 56.2%; because of missing responses, the samples in the different analyses ranged from 992 to 1,025). The data were equally divided by gender. The age range of the participants was 30 to 79 years old (M = 54.4). Data consisted of many of the same topics and measures covered in the MIDUS II data set used in Study 2. For our purposes, the Japanese data set allowed us to test our hypotheses using the same variables tested in Study 2.

Predictor variable: Supportive relationships. To measure the supportive nature of participants' relationships, we used eight items identical to those used in Study 2, creating a composite variable of *supportive relationships*. Higher scores reflect greater amounts of reported social support from family and friends (α = .81).

Dependent variable: Personal growth. We used the same indicators of personal growth (α = 74) as in Study 2.

Covariates. The covariates were identical to those in Study 2.

Mediator: Self-confidence. We used the same indicators of self-confidence (α = .69) as in Study 2.

Results and Discussion

Using the same analytic approach as in Study 2, supportive relationships significantly predicted personal growth, b = .34, p < .001, even after controlling for the various covariates.[2] Thus, consistent with Study 2, the more supportive people judged their close relationships to be, the higher their personal growth tendencies, even in a culture that puts more emphasis on the collective rather than the individual.

To test for mediation, we followed the procedure from Study 2. First, supportive relationships predicted self-confidence, b = .14, $t(983)$ = 2.79, p = .005, 95% CI = [.04, .25], and personal growth, b = .34, $t(983)$ = 7.70, p < .0001, 95% CI = [.26, .43]. Self-confidence predicted personal growth, b = .28, $t(982)$ = 10.58, p < .0001, 95% CI = [.22, .33]. A 5,000 bootstrap sample revealed a significant indirect effect of relationship type on personal growth via self-confidence (b = .04, 95% CI = [.01, .07]). Because the CI does not include 0, this means that the effect of supportive relationships on personal growth was statistically mediated by self-confidence. Also, because the interaction between supportive relationships and self-confidence was statistically significant (b = .10, p = .02), we conducted an additional mediational analysis in which we included a Supportive Relationships × Self-Confidence interaction term (mean-centered) as a covariate. The results indicated that even after controlling for the interaction, the indirect effect was significant, b = .04, 95% CI = [.01, .07]. These findings suggest a possibility that the I-through-We perspective may be a universal process.

General Discussion

In three studies, we provided experimental and nationally representative survey results indicating that supportive relationships are positively associated with personal growth. Study 1 demonstrated that briefly reminding people of a supportive other (vs. nonsupportive other) promoted personal growth as assessed by the pursuit of a growth goal. Extending the generality of the I-through-We perspective, Studies 2 and 3 showed that people's judgments of how supportive their close others are positively predicted personal growth in two distinct cultures that vary in their emphasis on the individual relative to the collective. Moreover, these studies provide converging evidence that feelings of self-confidence can partially explain the link between supportive relationships and personal growth.

Although personal growth plays an important role in human functioning and well-being, much research has considered it as an outcome of intrapersonal processes (Dweck, 1986; Dykman, 1998; Maslow, 1987; Ryff, 1989). Alternatively, our findings support the present framework—the I-through-We perspective—that proposes that the individual but importantly also their social relationships matter in promoting what is generally considered the domain of the individual—personal growth. In addition to critical intrapersonal factors such as self-regulation, we argue that one's supportive social context—by augmenting one's attitudes and beliefs related to the pursuit of personal goals—plays a critical role in personal growth. We have argued that supportive relationships promote personal growth through enhanced feelings of self-confidence. We demonstrated the validity of this argument by (a) manipulating the type of relationships people recalled and (b) measuring the supportive nature of people's relationships, and testing how these factors influenced personal growth. One strength of the current research is that we demonstrated the robustness and generality of the I-through-We perspective by using diverse samples and methods, as well as different ways in which we measured the key variables.

Our results are consistent with past theoretical perspectives and findings in the literature. For instance, Bowlby (1988) proposed that secure attachments can serve as a "secure base" that enables people to explore the world. Similarly, research on social support and close relationships has demonstrated how close others help people thrive (Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Rusbult et al., 2009). Moreover, although the involved mechanisms and generality

of goals may be different, our findings are also consistent with research on close others and the pursuit of specific goals endorsed by these close others (Brunstein et al., 1996; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003). At the same time, we extend previous research by demonstrating that the benefits of supportive relationships may generalize beyond exploration and goal-pursuits to personal growth, and by presenting a novel mechanism through which supportive relationships promote growth.

Finally, the present research found support for the I-through-We perspective in two cultural traditions that differ in the extent to which they endorse the individual over the collective. In addition to establishing the generality of the present framework, our findings suggest that the I-through-We perspective may reflect a basic and potentially universal process, although testing the idea in other cultural and social contexts is needed to make this claim more strongly (Henrich et al., 2010). Furthermore, our findings highlight the importance of assessing complex correlational structures like mediation (as opposed to testing mean differences across cultures) when examining cross-cultural phenomena (e.g., Na et al., 2010).

Life's Recurring Challenges and the Themes People Live By

Broadly, our studies speak to the interactive relation between two fundamental themes that recur in people's lives: distinguishing the self from others by fulfilling personal goals and being a good group member by fulfilling social obligations. Although research has shown that people are strongly motivated to pursue both of these values (Bakan, 1966; Hogan, 1983; Ybarra et al., 2008), the predominant view often seems to be that the two values conflict with each other.

For instance, Dionne (2012) argued that there exists a tension between the core values of individualism (e.g., liberty, individual opportunity, and self-expression) and community (e.g., community obligation and civic virtue) in American society. In his book on sociality and evolution, E. O. Wilson (2012) proposed that people are chronically conflicted to look out for themselves or to focus more on others from the ingroup. Similarly, Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness argues that a person's identity is shaped by *attempts to reconcile opposing needs* for assimilation (e.g., social identity) and differentiation from others (e.g., personal identity). Finally, the prevailing wisdom from cultural psychology has been that cultures that tend to be more collectivistic (focus on collective goals and harmony), put relatively less emphasis on promoting individualistic values (focus on individual goals and achievements), and vice versa (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hui, 1988). However, based on our data, we believe that these two fundamental values can be interactive in that at times supportive relationships promote individualistic values. Building positive social connections with others should put people in a good position to receive social support

that is instrumental to personal growth, as well as allowing people to strike a balance between these two fundamental values—to strive and connect.

Future Directions

We acknowledge limitations in the present studies. First, the correlational nature of Studies 2 and 3 does not allow us to make a causal claim or address the issue of bidirectionality regarding the I-through-We perspective. For instance, one could argue that people who strive successfully also enjoy more supportive social connections (e.g., others like them more). Nevertheless, the experimental results from Study 1 provide evidence for the direction consistent with the I-through-We perspective.

Although we found initial evidence supporting the generality of the I-through-We perspective, future studies could build on these efforts by testing the present framework in different cultures and social groups (e.g., different regions, social class). Finding similar patterns across diverse groups would further support the notion that the I-through-We perspective may be a universal process.

As for other potential mediating mechanisms, thinking about supportive others could make other types of mental contents and processes accessible. For instance, thinking about close others could lead to trust or a greater sense of control or power (Rusbult et al., 2009), security (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 2004), or energy (Luke, Sedikides, & Carnelley, 2012). Consequently, this could lead to different outcomes depending on the kinds of tasks people are asked to perform. Thus, it would be interesting for future studies to study the effects of supportive relationships in different judgment or decision contexts (e.g., Ybarra et al., 2012), as well as investigating other potential mechanisms underlying the link between supportive relationships and personal growth (e.g., Lee & Ybarra, 2017).

Furthermore, future research can also examine how negative relationships may influence personal growth. For instance, studies show that *after* relationship dissolution (i.e., romantic breakups), people exhibited more personal growth such as rediscovery of the self (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). However, it is unclear whether the growth benefits occurred as a result of struggling and learning from highly challenging life crises (i.e., work on posttraumatic growth, see Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) or due to being in a negative or unsupportive relationship. Moreover, it is important to note that the personal growth benefits in the above studies occurred after the dissolution. If negative relationships indeed promote personal growth, one would expect the growth benefits to occur when the relationship was intact (vs. after dissolution). A more plausible explanation seems to be that the benefits occurred after the breakup, when people have supposedly gone through additional critical processes such as positive reinterpretation or reappraisal of one's experience, acceptance, or sensemaking

(Park & Folkman, 1997; T. D. Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). In addition, Gomillion, Murray, and Lamarche (2015) showed that breaking up with goal instrumental partners predicted poorer subsequent goal progress, whereas breaking up with noninstrumental partners did not. Thus, it is likely that relationship dissolution promotes growth for people who leave their "negative" relationships (e.g., abusive). Nevertheless, examining when and how negative relationships influence personal growth seems to be an important future endeavor.

Finally, we do not claim that supportive relationships serve as a guarantee of personal growth. At times, reminders of social support can lead to social loafing (e.g., Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979), lower motivation, or the *outsourcing* of one's efforts to others (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011). Moreover, a growing number of studies suggest that at times close others can have a negative impact on personal strivings (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Kappes & Shrout, 2011). Thus, future studies should examine when and how supportive relationships promote or undermine personal growth.

Conclusion

People receive many benefits from supportive relationships. Those who view their relationships as supportive may confidently strive for growth. Our findings provide experimental and nationally representative results (from two distinct cultures) indicating that supportive relationships promote personal growth through enhanced feelings of self-confidence and more broadly speak to the interactive nature between the intrapersonal and interpersonal forces involved in personal growth. As suggested by the I-through-We perspective, the tendencies to connect with others and strive, and grow as individuals, may augment and magnify each other.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. All results hold without the covariates in the analyses.
2. As in Study 2, all results hold without the covariates in the analyses.

Supplemental Material

Supplementary material is available online with this article.

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