

## Theoretical Analyses

# Motivational Function of Plans and Goals

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## Abstract

The academic literature shows that by helping tune out distractions, goals can get individuals' to try harder, work longer, and achieve more. Goals that people set for themselves and that are devoted to attaining mastery are usually healthy. But goals imposed by others—sales targets, quarterly returns, standardized test scores—can sometimes have dangerous side effects (Pink, 2009). Because understanding action demands understanding intention, the idea of motivation is natural and readily expressed in everyday language. Cognitive mental events like goals and expectancies can function as a “spring to action”, a moving force that energizes and directs action in purposive ways (Reeve, 2005). Cognitive studies of motivation are dealing with relationship between cognition and action. Literature is indicating a few cognitive elements that can have motivational significance. The article presents the overview of theory and research about the motivational function of plans and goals, according to Goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) and Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Suggestions for additional research are also indicated.

**Keywords:** plans, goals, motivation, goal setting theory, Self-determination Theory

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The word “motivation” captures a number of distinct but closely related meanings. Because of this, when social scientists have asked, “what is motivation?” the question they have really been asking is, “what do we mean when we say ‘X was motivated to do Y’?” This is a question that has deep implications for social science and yet remains largely unresolved, though new techniques and technologies may finally allow us to answer the question far more meaningfully than has ever before been the case (Vecera, Miller, & Marcus, 2008).

The contemporary cognitive study of motivation began when a trio of psychologists - George Miller, Eugene Galanter, and Karl Pribram who investigated how plans motivate behavior (Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Reeve, 2005). According to these pioneers, people have mental representation of the ideal states of their behavior, environmental objects and events. People are also aware of the present state of their behavior, environment, and events. Any mismatch perceived between one’s present state and one’s ideal state instigates an experience of “*incongruity*” which has motivational properties. By suffering from incongruity, people formulate a plan to remove that incongruity. The incongruity acts as the motivational “*spring to action*” (provides energy) and *plan* is the cognitive means for advancing the present state toward an ideal state (provides direction). *Incongruity* is a fundamental motivational principle. There are several ways to eliminate the incongruity: a person can change the plan, change behavior (increase effort), or withdraw from the plan altogether (Reeve, 2005).

## Goals

A *Goal* is whatever an individual is striving to accomplish in their life (Locke, 1996; Reeve, 2005). Just like plans, goals generate motivation by focusing people's attention on the discrepancy (or incongruity) between their present and ideal level of accomplishment. Researchers refer to this discrepancy as a "*goal-performance discrepancy*" (Locke & Latham, 1990; Reeve, 2005). Generally speaking, people with goals are more successful than people without goals. Goal setting generally improves performance, but the *type* of goal a person sets for himself is a key determinant in the extent to which a goal translates into performance gains. As to types of goals, goals vary in how *difficult* they are and how *specific* they are.

*Goal difficulty* refers to how hard a goal is to accomplish. The more difficult a goal is, the more it energizes the performer. According to Locke (1996), the more difficult the goal, the greater the achievement is. This finding may seem surprising in view of the more intuitively appealing inverse-U function, predicted by Atkinson (1958) and others (Locke, 1996). However, it is almost impossible to replicate Atkinson's original finding (Locke & Latham, 1990). Locke's (1996) linear function assumes that the individual is committed to the goal and possesses the requisite ability and knowledge to achieve it. Without these, performance does drop at high goal levels.

*Goal specificity* refers to how clearly a goal informs the performer precisely what he is to do. The more specific or explicit the goal, the more precisely performance is regulated. High goal specificity is achieved mainly through quantification (increase sales by 10%) or enumeration (here is a list of tasks to be accomplished). Thus it reduces variance in performance, providing the individual control of performance. This is not to say that specificity is always desirable (it may not be in some creative innovation situations), but only that it has certain effects (Locke, 1996).

## Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990)

The suggested goals do not always enhance performance. According to the Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990; Webb & Sheeran, 2005), only those goals that are difficult and specific do enhance performance. There is a motivational reason for that: Difficult goals energize the performer (increase effort and persistence) and specific goals direct toward a particular course of action.

It is stated that an additional variable is crucial in making goal setting effective and that is *feedback* (Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Reeve, 2005). Goal setting is most effective when there is feedback showing relation to the goal. For people to pursue goals effectively, they need some means of checking or tracking their progress toward their goal (Locke, 1996). Without feedback, performance can be emotionally unimportant and uninvolving. Goal attainment breeds emotional satisfaction, while goal failure breeds emotional dissatisfaction (Bandura, 1991).

In addition to goals needing to be 1. Difficult and specific and 2. Coupled with feedback, a third condition is necessary before goals translate into performance gains: *goal acceptance* (Erez & Kanfer, 1983). Only internalized (i. e., accepted) goals improve performance, because goal acceptance breeds *goal commitment*<sup>1</sup>. Four factors determine whether an externally set goal will be accepted or rejected by the individual:

- Perceived difficulty of the imposed goal
- Participation in the goal-setting process
- Credibility of the person assigning the goal
- Extrinsic incentives ("E-Portfolio: Motivation and Emotion," 2011).

In other words, easy-to-accomplish goals generally breed goal acceptance, whereas difficult goals breed goal rejection. Generally, people do not accept the goals that others try to impose on them, but will accept them when they themselves participate in goal setting (Pink, 2009). The greater the credibility of the person who inflicts the goals, the greater the chance that these goals will be accepted. Awards such as money, public recognition and scholarships contribute positively to a performer's willingness to accept a goal, regardless of its difficulty, origin, or the credibility of the person assigning the goal (Reeve, 2005). Overall, goal acceptance is highest when goals are perceived to be easy or moderately difficult; goals are self-set (or at least negotiated to the performer's satisfaction); goals are assigned by credible and trustworthy others, and promise forthcoming personal benefit. Guidelines for successful goal setting, which were formulated by Gauggel & Hoop (2003) and Locke (1996) are shown in the list below:

1. The more difficult the goal, the greater the achievement.
2. The more specific or explicit the goal, the more precisely performance is regulated.
3. Goals that are both specific and difficult lead to highest performance.
4. Commitment to goals is most critical when goals are specific and difficult.
5. High commitment to a goal is achieved when:
  - a. the individual is convinced that the goal is important
  - b. the individual is convinced that the goal is attainable.
6. In addition to having a direct influence on performance, self-efficacy influences:
  - a. the difficulty level of the goal chosen or accepted
  - b. the commitment to goals
  - c. the response to negative feedback or failure
  - d. the choice of task strategies.
7. Goal setting is most effective when there is feedback showing progress in relation to the goal.
8. Goals affect performance by affecting the direction of action, the degree of effort exerted, and the persistence of action over time.

## Implementation Intentions

Goal setting seems promising as a motivational intervention strategy for helping people to accomplish the sort of things they wish to accomplish. The self-help books advise readers to set goals and to focus their full attention on these goals. If a person wants to make better grades, lose 10 pounds, save some money, or be successful in private life and work, then he or she must visualize the goal they want. Unfortunately, motivational processes are not that simple. The gap between goal-directed thinking and goal-direction action can be a wide one (Reeve, 2005). In a series of studies, where it is examined whether the "imagining success" really leads to achieving success, it was found that focusing on the goal actually interfered with goal attainment! Focusing on how to accomplish the goal, however, did facilitate goal attainment (Reeve, 2005).

These findings are important because they draw out the distinction between the content of the goal and process of goal striving, and also because they explain that once a goal has been set, it does not automatically translate

itself into effective performance. In other words, visualizing fantasies of success (i. e., wishful thinking) does not produce productive behavior (Oettingen, Grant, Smith, Skinner, & Gollwitzer, 2006).

## Formulating Implementation Intentions

According to the Formulating Implementation Intentions, it is common for individuals' to set goals, but fail to follow through them (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). An example would be that New Year's resolutions where people set high goals but often fail to achieve (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Unfortunately, this phenomenon does not apply only to the New Year's period, but also to the rest of the year, when people often do not achieve the goals, for a number of reasons.

Once a goal is set, the following volitional problems emerge:

1. How to start, despite the daily distractions?
2. How to persist in spite of difficulties and setbacks?
3. How to resume, once a disruption occurs? ("Implementation Intentions," 2002).

In that sense, *Implementation intention* is such a plan - when, where, how and for how long goal-directed action will occur. People who develop a plan of actions that lead to achievement of goals, have more chances to achieve those goals (Reeve, 2005).

Despite the large number of convincing studies supporting the goal-setting approach, there are several problems with goal-setting theory. To begin with, studies on the quality of goals have been ignored. Both quantity and quality are important components of performance in many jobs or daily life situations. Second, goal-setting theory does not consider *goal conflicts*, although they occur in many daily life situations and may have dysfunctional effects on. Third, the influence of goal difficulty and specificity has been investigated mainly in its effects on intensity of behavior. No study has investigated direction, intensity, or persistence simultaneously. Fourth, the nature of criteria used in goal-setting research is limited. In order to meet the specificity requirement of goal-setting, performance measures generally take the form of countable criteria. Experimental tasks (e.g., solving anagrams or sorting cards into piles) yield concrete scores, such as "number of cards sorted" or "number of errors made." However, real life criteria are less clear and sometimes very subjective. Finally, although numerous studies have found that goal-setting leads to performance improvement, there are only a few studies that have tried to explain how goal-setting works by analyzing the dynamics responsible for goal-setting effects, e.g., the process by which task-goal attributes affect performance (e.g., Gauggel & Hoop, 2003; Schmidt, Kleinbeck, & Brockmann, 1984).

## Self-Determination Theory: Goals

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) has differentiated from the concept of goal-directed behavior, yet it has taken a very different approach. SDT differentiates in the *content* of goals or outcomes and the *regulatory processes* through which the outcomes are pursued, making predictions for different contents and for different processes. Further, it uses the concept of *innate psychological needs* as the basis for integrating the differentiations of goal contents and regulatory processes, and the predictions that results from those differentiations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

The theory postulates that a critical issue in the effects of goal pursuit and attainment is the degree to which people are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs, as they pursue and attain their valued outcomes. The concept of needs was once widely employed in empirical psychology to organize the study of motivation.

Although variously defined at the physiological or psychological levels and as innate or learned, the concept of needs specified the *content* of motivation and provided a basis for the energy and direction of action.

SDT posits that individuals' have three basic psychological needs: needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, the satisfaction of these psychological needs is essential for psychological growth optimal functioning, and well-being.

SDT claims that it is not only the quantity of goals that matters but also their quality. It is argued that people pursue qualitatively different types of goals, which will lead to considerably different outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

*Intrinsic goals* such as community feelings, affiliation, health, and self-development are distinguished from *extrinsic goals* such as image, financial success, and appearing physically attractive (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

In line with an organismic<sup>ii</sup> way of thinking, intrinsic goals are theorized to promote psychological well-being because intrinsically oriented individuals' are more likely to satisfy their basic psychological needs along the path toward goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In contrast, extrinsic goals often entail the contingent reactions of others and are associated with more stressful interpersonal comparisons. They reduce opportunities to engage in basic psychological need satisfying experiences, which in turn lead to less subjective wellbeing (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

Kasser and Ryan (1996) examined seven life goals including accumulation of wealth and material possessions, social recognition and fame, being physically attractive and having an appealing image, personal growth and development, meaningful affiliation and close relationships, generativity and community involvement, and being physically healthy—and proposed that those aspirations were likely to fall into two general categories. The researchers found that money, fame, and image loaded on one factor, which they labeled *extrinsic*, whereas personal growth, close relationships, community involvement, and physical health loaded on another factor, which they labeled *intrinsic*.

The intrinsic factor was labeled because its goals are expressive of humans inherent growth tendency and are conducive to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the factor was labeled extrinsic because its goals typically are pursued as a means to some separable outcome and are not directly linked to satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Kasser and Ryan (1996) reported that the importance of pursuing intrinsic aspirations related positively to various indicators of well-being, including positive affect, vitality, and self-actualization, and related negatively to various indicators of ill-being, including depression, anxiety, and health problems. Similar results have been found in diverse countries and working with adults as well as college students (e.g., Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). According to Duriez, Meeus, and Vansteenkiste (2012), association between individuals' type of goal and their well-being was found in various nations and age groups, and with different measures of both goals and well-being. In addition to displaying well-being decrements, people who place a relatively high value on extrinsic relative to intrinsic goals were found to perform less well in academics (Tabachnick, Miller, & Relyea, 2008; Vansteenkiste,

Lens, & Deci, 2006), to be less persistent in physical exercising (Sebire, Standage, & Vansteenkiste, 2009) and to be more prone to bulimic symptoms (Verstuyf, Vansteenkiste, & Soenens, 2012).

It is evident that the plans and goals have an important role in human behavior. Goals are important regulators of human action as they set the standards to which we compare our perceptions and expectations. Because of that, goals are central constructs of many psychological theories, helping to explain why people differ in their choices, persistence and intensity in behavior. Planning and setting goals for the future increases well-being, because it provides meaning and structure to human lives, but also motivation for any activities people embark on.

## Conclusion

By focusing on individuals' plans and goals, motivation researchers have learned much about the reasons why individuals' choose to engage or disengage in different activities, and how individuals' plans and goals relate to their achievement behaviors. Various theoretical perspectives on these issues are flourishing, and motivation research remains very active.

We conclude by noting two important issues that need further study. First, although various theoretical models are present, there is a need for theoretical integration in the field, particularly with respect to the models that incorporate plans and goals constructs. Although there are some differences across these constructs, the similarities likely outweigh the differences. The proliferation of different terms (and measures) for similar constructs makes theoretical integration more difficult. Second, the focus on plans and goals constructs has led to important advances in the field of motivation. Therefore, it is important for motivation researchers to investigate such processes more fully.

## Notes

- i) The degree to which the person is genuinely attached to and determined to reach the goals (Locke, 1996).
- ii) Self-determination Theory is an organismic dialectical approach. It begins with the assumption that people are active organisms, with evolved tendencies toward growing, mastering ambient challenges, and integrating new experiences into a coherent sense of self. Thus, it is the dialectic between the active organism and the social context that is the basis for SDT's predictions about behavior, experience, and development ([What is Self-Determination Theory?](#), n.d.).

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