



Vicissitudes of goal commitment: Satisfaction, investments, and alternatives

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ABSTRACT

Constructs typically used to understand commitment between individuals were used to elucidate individual differences in goal commitment. In Study 1, 299 college students completed assessments of goal satisfaction, investments, alternatives and commitment regarding an academic goal. Structural equation modeling demonstrated confirmatory evidence for satisfaction's, investments', and alternatives' collective impact on people's goal commitment. In Study 2, the model components were manipulated by having 236 college students considered the goal to learn a new language and read information suggesting they were high or low in satisfaction, investments, and alternatives. Results demonstrated all three factors had a causal impact on people's level of goal commitment. Both studies found an individual's level of goal commitment was strongest when satisfaction and investments were high and the impact of alternatives was low.

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“There is no more remarkable difference in human character than that between resolute and irresolute natures.” – William James

1. Introduction

Numerous factors impact whether people accomplish their goals; however, one primary component is goal commitment. In accordance with current conceptions of this construct (e.g., Oettingen et al., 2009), we define goal commitment as one's intention or determination to reach a particular goal. The importance of commitment was well appreciated by William James (1890) in recognizing one of the most notable differences in people is that between those who are committed and those who are not. As such, commitment is thought to have a vital influence on goal pursuit and is seen as a prerequisite for successful goal attainment (e.g., Jostmann & Koole, 2009; Oettingen et al., 2009).

A bevy of work has demonstrated that people high in commitment are more likely to put effort and time toward their goals, are more likely to persist at, and are subsequently more likely to achieve their goals, compared to those low in commitment (e.g., Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Jostmann & Koole, 2009; Klinger, 1975; Oettingen et al., 2009; Shah & Higgins, 1997). But less is known

about the factors that determine why some people are more committed to their goals than others. As Oettingen and colleagues (2009) state, “although plenty of research examines the beneficial consequences of goal commitment, it is much less clear how goal commitment emerges” (p. 610). The few studies that have examined potential antecedents have focused almost exclusively on expectancy and value (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). These findings suggest that people's commitment is a function of their expectancy of attaining the goal, the valence of that particular goal, and the interaction between them (Shah & Higgins, 1997). However, it is likely that person-level variables other than expectancy and value influence people's level of goal commitment (e.g., Klein, Molloy, & Brinsfield, 2012). The aim of the present work was to address this blind spot in the literature. In doing so, we relied on constructs typically used to predict relationship commitment as a general framework to better understand goal commitment.

1.1. Relationship commitment

Within the interpersonal relations literature, commitment is viewed as an intention of continuance with an interpersonal affiliation (e.g., romantic partner, group, organization). According to Rusbult and colleagues' Investment Model (1998), interpersonal commitment is a function of three determinants: satisfaction, alternatives, and investment. Satisfaction is conceptualized as the emotional sense that people's relational needs are being met by their partner. Alternatives are conceptualized as the attractiveness of the best obtainable alternative relationships (e.g., new romantic partner). Finally, investment is conceptualized as the amount of resources an individual puts into the relationship and that would be

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lost if the relationship was severed (e.g., time, money, personal identity).

All three constructs are thought to impact commitment in an additive manner, such that people are highest in relationship commitment when they are satisfied, invested, and the quality of their alternative relationships is low (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). As such, these factors have been used successfully to predict whether people stay with or leave their relationship partner (Rusbult et al., 1998).

1.2. Satisfaction, alternatives, and investments in the goals literature

Just as people decide to “stay with” or leave their romantic partner, people also decide to “stick with” or abandon their goals. Although these two conceptions of commitment are not identical to each other, factors that influence commitment between individuals may be analogous to the factors that influence goal commitment within the individual (Doise, 1986). Surprisingly, there is no direct evidence within the goal literature that shows the specific factors of satisfaction with, investments in, and alternatives to a goal directly impacting goal commitment. However, these three constructs have each been connected to goal-relevant outcomes that are similar (but not identical) to goal commitment. Below, we briefly review this suggestive evidence.

1.2.1. Satisfaction

It has long been held that affect plays an important role in motivation, both as an outcome and a determinant of goal-directed behavior. In terms of an outcome, people who are successful in their goal pursuits are happier (Emmons & Diener, 1986), more satisfied with life (Brunstein, 1993) and display greater positive affect (Hsee & Abelson, 1991; Lawrence, Carver, & Scheier, 2002); whereas people who are unsuccessful display negative affect (Emmons & Diener, 1986). In terms of a determinant, however, the picture is less clear. Some theorists argue positive affect decreases goal-directed effort (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005); however, many other theorists argue positive affect increases motivation and propels the individual toward goal attainment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gollwitzer, 1990; Vohs & Baumeister, 2008). To complicate the issue further, some researchers have examined the influence of general positive affect (e.g., Fishbach & Labroo, 2007) whereas others have focused exclusively on positive affect associated with goal progress (e.g., Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007). Consistent with other researchers' conceptualization (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Vohs & Baumeister, 2008), we define *goal satisfaction* as positive affect associated with achieving desired progress toward a goal. In line with hedonic and reinforcement principles (e.g., James, 1890) and positive emotion theories (e.g., Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999), we predict the more people are satisfied with their goal in this way, the greater their goal commitment.

1.2.2. Alternatives

People often pursue numerous goals at any given moment (Little, 1989) and therefore must balance their multiple goals when deciding where to contribute their limited resources (e.g., Kanfer, Ackerman, Murtha, Dugdal, & Nelson, 1994; Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Whenever a current goal interferes with the attainment of at least one other goal that the individual simultaneously wants to achieve, *goal conflict* occurs (Emmons, King, & Sheldon, 1993). We therefore define *goal alternatives* as the presence of conflicting goals that interfere with one's focal goal (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002).

Successful goal pursuit relies on how people manage alternative goals (Beckmann & Kuhl, 1984; Kuhl, 2000; Shah et al., 2002) and people high in goal commitment are better able to do so (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Shah et al., 2002). But it remains to be seen if the

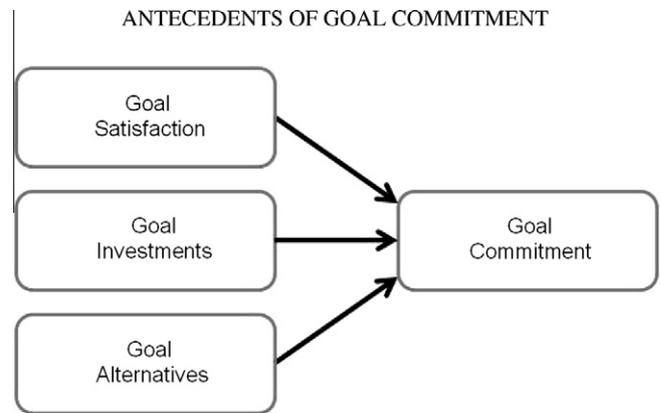


Fig. 1. Model of goal commitment: commitment to goal as a function of goal satisfaction, goal investments, and goal alternatives.

reverse is also true, such that the presence of alternative goals decreases goal commitment. We predict that the more people feel there are alternative goals that take them away from their focal goal, the less committed they will be toward their focal goal.

1.2.3. Investments

We define *goal investments* as the amount of resources (e.g., time, energy, effort, money) people have put into the pursuit of their goal.¹ The construct of investments has largely been ignored within the goals literature, although a few constructs may be tangentially related. For instance, in the management and organizational literature, the *sunk cost effect* demonstrates that people with monetary investments in an activity are more likely to continue with this activity to ensure these investments have not been wasted (Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Staw, 1981). By applying this concept to goals, we predict that the more invested people are in their goal, the more committed they will be to the goal as a way of ensuring their time and energy have not been in vain.

1.3. Present research

1.3.1. Overview of studies

Although there are a number of tangentially relevant studies, to our knowledge no study has directly assessed whether individual differences in goal satisfaction, goal investments, and/or goal alternatives impact goal commitment, either independently or collectively. The present investigation seeks to fill this void in the literature. Guided by theories of relationship commitment, we posit a model that indicates people's goal commitment is comprised of their satisfaction, investments, and alternatives that collectively build on each other in an additive way (see Fig. 1). Thus, people would be most committed to their goals when their satisfaction and investments were high and their quality of alternatives was low.

1.3.2. Measuring goal commitment

Measuring goal commitment can be a challenge because the concept tends to be vaguely-defined in the motivation literature. Furthermore, the most commonly used measure of commitment (Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989) has been shown to be confounded with the antecedent of expectancy (DeShon & Landis,

¹ *Goal investment* is not to be confused with how Pomerantz, Saxon, and Oishi (2000) use this term. Those authors define goal investment as the level of personal importance placed on the goal. Although importance certainly plays a role in goal pursuit, it is not how we define goal investment (i.e., the resources put into the attainment of the goal).

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