



Effective pursuit of personal goals: The fostering effect of dispositional optimism on goal commitment and goal progress



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 December 2014
Received in revised form 6 March 2015
Accepted 8 March 2015
Available online 25 March 2015

Keywords:

Personal goals
Dispositional optimism
Goal pursuit
Goal progress
Self-regulation

ABSTRACT

Personal goals play a leading role in directing behavior and influencing well-being. Thus, it is important to assess goal dimensions promoting effective goal pursuit. The current research aimed at identifying the best predictors of goal pursuit, operationalized as perceived goal progress, among goal-related variables and individual differences in dispositional optimism. Two studies examined the influence of optimism on goal progress, commitment, expectancy, value, and conflict. Moreover, the mediation effect of expectancy in the relationships among optimism, commitment and progress was assessed.

Participants in the first cross-sectional study were 283 young people (19–32 years old), whereas participants in the second longitudinal study were 409 people (19–71 years old). They reported their most important personal goals and rated each of them with respect to goal progress, conflict, expectancy, commitment, and value. Dispositional optimism was also assessed.

In both studies, multilevel and mediational analyses demonstrated the fostering role of optimism on perceived goal progress and commitment through the mediation of goal expectancy. Thus, optimists are more likely than pessimists to report more perceived progress in their pursued personal goals. By clarifying the role of optimism in fostering goal progress and commitment, this research provides insight on how effective goal pursuit could be promoted.

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1. Introduction

Aim of this research is to evaluate the role of dispositional optimism in the pursuit of personal goals and to identify the best predictors of effective goal pursuit, operationalized as perceived goal progress. Specifically, we tested the role of personal goal dimensions of expectancy, value, commitment and conflict, in terms of both perceived and objective conflict (i.e., inherent and resource conflict), in fostering perceived progress. Moreover, we evaluated the mediating effect of these goal variables in the relationships between optimism and effective goal pursuit.

Personal goals are subjectively meaningful objectives that individuals actively pursue in their daily lives (Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, & Soderlind, 2002; Little, 1983). Following Klinger (1977), personal goals have generally been conceptualized as a mix of idiographic and nomothetic aspects. Goals are idiographic constructs because different individuals tend to report unique constellations of personal goals. In addition, personal goals could be

evaluated and compared according to a set of nomothetic variables, such as goal expectancy, value, commitment, conflict and perceived progress.

Literature shows a solid agreement in recognizing that personal goals play a leading role in directing behavior and in promoting well-being (Emmons, 1986; Little, 1983; Wallenius, 2000). Specifically, the primacy of personal goals in determining actions and conducts is clearly stressed by Carver and Scheier (1998) who characterized individual self-regulation as a process of monitoring one's present behavior, comparing one's actions with meaningful goals and adjusting one's behavior to minimize discrepancies between present actions and desired states. These authors theorise the existence of a feedback loop, called the *meta-monitoring system*, which monitors the effectiveness of movement toward goals. If the rate of progress is too slow, the negative affect of sadness and depression arises; if the rate of progress is satisfactorily quick, the subject experiences satisfaction and happiness. It is noteworthy that in this conceptualization perceived progress, rather than effective goal attainment or failure, exerts a greater influence in determining positive or negative affect. Coherently, empirical evidence suggested that the perceived progress toward highly self-valued goals results in positive emotional states as joy, happiness and satisfaction, and significantly affects

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subjective well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986; Hortop, Wrosch, & Gagné, 2013; Klug & Maier, 2014; Oishi & Diener, 2001).

The evidence of the pivotal role of personal goals in influencing people's behavior and well-being has attracted the attention of researchers with respect to the antecedents of effective goals pursuit. In previous research, the effectiveness of goal pursuit has been generally operationalized as perceived progress, namely people's subjective evaluation of the rate of advancement toward their personal goals. In fact, coherently with the idiographic nature of the constellation of goal pursued by each individual, it is very difficult and nearly impossible to obtain an objective and common measure of goal progress. Moreover, the explanatory importance of perceived progress was also stressed by a recent meta-analysis by Klug and Maier (2014) that found a stronger association of perceived progress, rather than goal attainment, with subjective well-being. Few studies have been devoted to the identification of goal-related variables and individual characteristics that could foster advancement toward pursued personal goals. Among goal-related variables, expectancy, value, commitment and conflict are the most theoretical and empirical examined correlates of progress.

Effective goal pursuit is theoretically considered to be influenced by the level of goal conflict (i.e., the circumstances in which an individual's effective goal achievement is impeded by the pursuit of another goal). Individuals generally do not strive for one personal goal at time but simultaneously pursue several goals. Therefore, each personal goal could be an obstacle and frustrate the achievement of the other goals. Generally, goal conflict has been conceptualized as an unitary construct and it has been operationalized as perceived conflict (e.g., Emmons, 1986; Emmons & King, 1988). In this framework, adopting an idiographic approach, people are asked to compare each pair of their pursued goal and rate whether being successful in one goal harmful effects on the other goal. More recently, Segerstrom and Solberg Nes (2006) proposed two kinds of conflict: inherent and resource conflict. Both types of conflict could have harmful effect on goal achievement and progress. Resource conflict arises because there are limited amount of resources, as energy, time and money, available to pursued goals, thus the resources allocated to a specific goal diminish the resources available for the pursuit of another goal and subsequently decrease the likelihood of satisfactorily pursuing both goals. Inherent conflict arises when progressing toward one goal involves more difficulties in reaching another goal because the actions performed to advance toward one desired state distance us from another goal. Differently from research by Emmons and colleagues (Emmons, 1986; Emmons & King, 1988), levels of inherent and resource conflict among participants' goals has been generally rated post hoc by external raters (Hardy, Crofford, & Segerstrom, 2011; Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2006). Despite these theoretical links among conflict and effective goal pursuit, there is a scarcity of empirical evaluation of this relationship. Segerstrom and Solberg Nes (2006) has evaluated the effect of inherent and resource conflict on goal progress and found no association of these two kinds of conflict with perceived progress.

Among other goal-related variables, goal commitment represents one of the most important requirements of satisfactory goal progress. Locke and Latham (1990) defined goal commitment as people's attachment or determination to reach a pursued goal. Commitment influences behavior, motivation, persistence and performance in various situations (Brown, 1996; Latham & Locke, 2006). Specifically, once people are highly committed to a goal, they are motivated to invest effort to reduce the discrepancy between their current situation and the desired state (Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). In fact, as showed by

the meta-analysis of Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, and Alge (1999), commitment positively influences goal performance.

Given the importance of commitment for goal progress, researchers have focused on the other goal-related factors that affect commitment. Expanding on the pioneering work of Atkinson (1964), psychologists have noted the fostering effect of value and expectancy on goal commitment. Goal value is generally defined as the subjective importance of the goal or anticipated joy in goal fulfillment (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986; Oishi & Diener, 2001). Instead, goal expectancy is a multifaceted term that has been described in various ways, such as probability of goal achievement or difficulty. According to Liberman and Förster (2008), we define goal expectancy as an individual's evaluation of whether he/she can attain the desired end state through actions or the probability of goal achievement. Expectancy-value models of motivation have highlighted the need of both expectancy and value for goal commitment (Atkinson, 1964; Vroom, 1964). Thus, people are more likely to be highly committed to and determined in goal-oriented behavior when they pursue highly valued goals. Also expectancy, a pivotal component of the self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998), is expected to sustain effort and commitment in goal pursuit. Specifically, goal expectancy could act as watershed between two opposed types of conduct: active effort and disengagement. When individuals hold high levels of expectancy, they actively strive for their goal and renew goal commitment. In contrast, with a low expectancy of success, individuals tend to disengage and abandon their goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). The expectancy of success is then considered to influence goal progress indirectly through the mediational effect of goal commitment. That is, individuals who pursue a goal with high levels of expectancy tend to be more committed to the goal and, subsequently, are more likely to report greater advancement. As underlined by Fontaine and Shaw (1995), the expectancy-value theory distinguishes between expectancies that are goal- and domain-specific and those which are more global and general in scope. This theory assumes that a certain outcome is best predicted by domain-specific expectancy (Carver & Scheier, 1998). However, a growing empirical evidence suggested that dispositional optimism, defined by Scheier and Carver (1985) as a generalized expectancy of positive future outcomes, have relevant effects on both general and very specific outcomes in various life domains.

Coherently, individual differences in dispositional optimism have been theoretically and empirically linked to effective goal pursuit. Scheier and Carver's conceptualization of optimism (1985) is embedded in a self-regulation and expectancy-value model in which goal directed behavior is strongly influenced and oriented by outcome expectancy. Expectations of successful outcomes motive people to renew effort and strive for their goal when obstacles or difficulties arise. As stated above, expectancy could vary in specificity, from the very concrete domain-specific to the very broad level (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Specific expectancies should be very crucial in explaining performance in concrete actions. Unlike more domain-specific aspects concerning goal-related behavior, such as sense of mastery (Pearlin, Nguyen, Schieman, & Milkie, 2007) or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), generalized expectancy should be very important in predicting outcomes that, as personal goals, are very broad and general in scope. Thus, expectation that good things will happen could be an adaptive individual characteristic of optimists in fostering personal goal-related behavior. Optimism has a favorable effect on domain-specific goal expectancy: although difficulties encountered in the pursuit of a personal goal may cause a sudden sense of doubt and distrust, this feeling is strongly counteracted by differences in generalized expectancy (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

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