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Unattainable educational goals: Disengagement, reengagement with alternative goals, and consequences for subjective well-being

Quand les buts de formation deviennent inatteignables : désengagement, réengagement envers d'autres buts et conséquences en termes de bien-être

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Is it always positive, in terms of well-being, to be highly committed to one's goals? Even if giving up on goals is most often seen as an undesirable response to difficulties, some researchers have begun to demonstrate the benefits of goal disengagement and reengagement with another goal when faced with unattainable goals.

Objective. – This study aims to test the impact of goal commitment, goal disengagement and goal reengagement on several indicators of well-being in the higher education context, where in first year, a relatively large proportion of students may perceive their initial educational goal as unattainable.

Method. – Some 357 students with secondary school leaving qualifications were surveyed in a first wave of data collection; 186 of these also participated in a second wave.

Results. – Results show that the positive impact of goal commitment on well-being disappears, or even becomes negative, when the goal is perceived as unattainable. Moreover, disengagement from an unattainable goal was found to have beneficial effects on self-mastery. However, this disengagement was not enough to reduce depressive feelings; it must be accompanied by reengagement with an alternative goal.

Conclusion. – These results are discussed and proposals for future research are put forward.

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R É S U M É

Être fortement engagé envers ses buts est-il toujours positif pour le bien-être des individus ? Bien que l'abandon de ses projets soit généralement considéré comme une réponse non souhaitable face aux difficultés, quelques chercheurs ont commencé à montrer les bénéfices du désengagement et du réengagement envers un autre but en cas de confrontation à un but inatteignable. Notre étude a pour but de tester l'impact de l'engagement, du désengagement et du réengagement sur plusieurs indicateurs de bien-être, et ce, dans le contexte de l'enseignement supérieur où, en première année, un certain nombre d'étudiants vont percevoir leur but de formation initial comme inatteignable. Trois cent cinquante-sept diplômés du secondaire ont participé à une première phase de récolte de données par questionnaire ; 186 d'entre eux ont également pris part à une seconde. Les résultats soutiennent que l'impact positif de l'engagement envers un but sur le bien-être disparaît, voire devient négatif, quand le but en question est inatteignable. Par ailleurs, le désengagement d'un but inatteignable a des effets positifs sur le sentiment de contrôle. Cependant, ce désengagement ne permet pas de réduire les sentiments dépressifs. Pour ce faire, il doit être combiné à un réengagement envers un autre but. Nous terminons par une discussion des résultats.

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1. Introduction

The transition from secondary school to post-secondary education is a key moment in students' educational trajectories, as it requires them to make important career choices. Increasingly, advisers try to develop interventions to guide students in forming their educational goals. Most of these interventions are aimed at helping students define an educational goal for themselves and increasing their commitment to this goal. This work is influenced by the generally acknowledged positive role of goal commitment. The positive consequences of being highly committed to an educational goal have been extensively demonstrated empirically (e.g., Germeijs and Verschueren, 2007). But high commitment can also have negative consequences (Pomerantz et al., 2000), particularly when students have goals that they perceive as unattainable. Despite this, this negative side to high goal commitment is rarely investigated.

A notable exception is the work of some researchers (e.g., Brandtstädter and Rothermund, 2002; Wrosch et al., 2003a) who have begun to demonstrate the benefits of two processes in the self-regulation of perceived unattainable goals. These are goal disengagement and goal reengagement. However, these processes have generally been studied as trait-like personal characteristics. There is still a need for research on the self-regulation of a specific type of unattainable goal, namely educational goals. During their first year at college, a considerable number of students will feel that their educational goal is unattainable. This study aimed to investigate the consequences of high commitment to an educational goal on students' subjective well-being when this goal is perceived as unattainable. The processes of disengagement from the unattainable educational goal and reengagement with another goal are also analysed for their impact on subjective well-being.

1.1. The consequences of goal commitment

Goal commitment—the extent to which a particular goal is associated with a strong sense of determination and with the willingness to invest effort in attaining it—and its consequences have been investigated in several empirical studies (see Pomerantz et al., 2000, for a summary). These studies have identified numerous positive consequences of a strong commitment to a goal, including an improvement in subjective well-being. People who are very committed to their goals see their lives as exceptionally meaningful (McGregor and Little, 1998; Wrosch et al., 2003a), perceive themselves as being in control of their lives (e.g., Ryff and Keyes, 1995) and experience a good deal of positive emotion (feeling proud, happy and joyful) (e.g., Emmons, 1986). These emotions in turn give rise to few depressive symptoms.

The more specific consequences of a high commitment to an educational goal—defined as the goal the student is pursuing in choosing his or her study programme—were investigated by Germeijs and Verschueren (2007). Their results suggest that, within the career decision-making process, commitment to the goal is the most important predictor of choice satisfaction, choice stability and adjustment within the chosen option, and is therefore an indirect predictor of performance. However, to the best of our knowledge, the consequences of a high commitment to an educational goal on students' well-being have not been investigated.

All these results support the general impression that strong commitment to personal goals is important, and therefore that giving up on a goal is an undesirable response to difficulty (Wrosch et al., 2003a). However, some authors have begun to investigate the proposition that strong commitment to a goal can also increase psychological distress. Among them are Brandtstädter and Rothermund (2002), who propose that a continuing commitment to unfeasible goals may result in the individual becoming trapped on

a barren path. This experience of slow progress toward goal attainment or even failure may have a negative impact on subjective well-being (Carver and Scheier, 1990).

1.2. Unattainable educational goals

People who perceive themselves as unable to attain a specific goal whatever their efforts are likely to perceive this goal as unattainable (Wrosch et al., 2003a). During the first year in higher education, a certain proportion of students will come to perceive their educational goal as much more difficult to attain than they had imagined when they chose their study programme. Some of these students will even begin to perceive their educational goal as becoming out of reach. There can be various reasons for educational goals to be seen as unattainable. Some students have focused, sometimes from an early age, on a vocational dream, but have not thought about the educational requirements of this dream; they are pursuing a goal that does not match their competences (Miller and Brickman, 2004). Moreover, the transition from secondary school to post-secondary education involves a lot of change: the picture students had of the academic requirements at the end of secondary school may be quite different from the actual demands made of them at university (Tinto, 1997). In this new setting, even if students had thought about the requirements of their educational goal when they chose it, unexpected failure in academic tasks occurs quite frequently (Wrosch et al., 2003a), which can give rise to perceived goal unattainability. Moreover, the attainable or unattainable character of the goals is especially evident in most educational systems, due to the frequent and clear positive or negative feedback given to students on their progress. It is therefore particularly interesting to investigate the self-regulation of perceived unattainable goals in this educational context.

When facing problems in the pursuit of a goal, people can react in two different ways: either they tenaciously continue to be committed to their goal even in the face of obstacles and try to modify the situation to meet the requirements of the goal (assimilative tendency); or they disengage from the goal and adjust their aims to the constraints of the situation (accommodative tendency) (Brandtstädter and Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter and Rothermund, 2002). Based on the expectancy-value model (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002), people who doubt their ability to attain their goal should be more likely to abandon it. However, not everyone gives up his or her goal equally easily. This is a relatively difficult task and people who have a strong sense of personal control and efficacy may be less ready to adjust their goal to the situation (Brandtstädter and Renner, 1990; Wrosch et al., 2007). Moreover, not all goals are equally easy to disengage from. The more important a goal is perceived to be, the more difficult the disengagement is likely to be (Carver and Scheier, 1998).

The influence of people's reactions to unattainable goals on their well-being has already been investigated. Brandtstädter and Renner (1990) summarised the evidence on the occurrence of depressive symptoms as follows: "The onset, duration, and severity of depressive episodes depend not only on the degree of perceived control over personally important developmental domains [as postulated by learned helplessness theories] but as well on the ability or willingness to disengage from unfeasible goals and to build up new commitments and developmental perspectives" (pp. 64–65). Being aware of one's inability to attain a goal to which one is strongly committed has been shown to be likely to give rise to depressive feelings. Disengagement from the impossible goal and the construction of a new personal goal may put an end to this depressive phase (Brandtstädter and Rothermund, 2002). However, accommodative processes (as a synonym for resignation) often have negative connotations, and these processes were neglected for a long time by research on motivation. The empirical

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