



## The relationship between implicit and explicit motives, goal pursuit, and autobiographical memory content during a diary study

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### ABSTRACT

This online diary study investigated how motives interact with goal pursuit to predict daily autobiographical experiences. Participants ( $N = 141$ ) completed measures of implicit and explicit achievement, provided daily memories and reports of their goal pursuit during a 3-week diary period. A stronger implicit achievement motive at the onset of the study was associated with more agentic (and fewer communal) autobiographical content. Goal progress was linked with using more agentic words, while goal attainability was related to using more communal words. Interactions between motives and goal pursuit on autobiographical memory suggests a trade-off: Favorable goal pursuit conditions may prompt people not motivated for achievement to shift their focus from agentic to communal themes, while individuals motivated for achievement maintain their priorities.

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### 1. Introduction

In the past, several studies have investigated how people's needs and desires, and the manner in which they pursue their goals, result in pathways towards well-being (see e.g., Brunstein, 1993; Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grässmann, 1998). More recent studies have focused on the importance of motivational processes for everyday cognitive processes and in particular one's autobiographical memory (see Bender & Woike, 2010; Woike, 2008 for overviews), which is considered one of the constitutional elements of a person's identity (Bluck, 2003; Pillemer, 1998). But how are the concerns and challenges that an individual experiences when pursuing a goal reflected in the daily recollection of their autobiographical memories? It has been argued that it is necessary to consider situational information (like the specifics of goal pursuit) in order to understand the role of motives in people's lives (Schultheiss, 2008; Schultheiss, Kordik, Kullmann, Rawolle, & Rösch, 2009; Woike, 2008). An inspection of the intersection of personological and situational factors has also proven fruitful for the investigation of memory processes (Woike, Bender, & Besner, 2009). We therefore propose that the types of memories individuals recall may not only depend on their motivational disposition, but also on the situational characteristics of their goal pursuit.

For example, in study-related stress periods, achievement topics might be more prevalent in an achievement-motivated student's recollection of his or her life compared to a student not motivated by achievement. However, little is known yet about the motivational and goal-related antecedents of such recollections, a gap which we set out to investigate in the present longitudinal diary study. In the following sections, we summarize the existing literature on the relationship between implicit and explicit motives, goal characteristics, and autobiographical memory.

Implicit motivational processes have been traditionally described as operating outside of conscious awareness (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Schultheiss, 2008). Self-attributed, or explicit, motives, on the other hand, are studied via self-report questionnaires and have been theorized to be particularly related to the self-concept and social categories. Studies that have demonstrated the validity for discriminating between these motive dispositions also found that they develop at ontogenetically different stages and are associated with different types of behaviors (McClelland & Pilon, 1983; for an overview, see Schultheiss, 2008; Woike, 2008). The two motive systems are not strongly correlated (Schultheiss & Pang, 2007), but their interaction can have important consequences: An alignment, or congruence between the two systems (e.g., being implicitly and explicitly motivated for achievement) is beneficial for a person's well-being, since such an individual is striving on both conscious and unconscious levels towards the same kind of goals (Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005; Brunstein & Maier, 2005; Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003; Hofer, Chasiotis, & Campos,

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2006). If, however, an individual's implicit motivational disposition is at odds with consciously desired, explicit goals, this tension is experienced as emotional distress (Pueschel, Schulte, & Michalak, 2011).

Motives have been shown to be of particular importance for how individuals deal with the challenges of daily goal pursuit (Palys & Little, 1983), and numerous researchers have advocated that pursuing personally meaningful goals is one of the essential ingredients in building and maintaining satisfaction with life (see Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989). One study, for example, found that a person's motivational disposition is a crucial determinant of pathways towards emotional well-being (Brunstein et al., 1998): While progress towards goals that are motive-congruent (i.e., whose content is related to one's dominant motive orientation) is experienced as personally satisfying, progress towards goals that are not aligned with a person's predominant motive disposition is not experienced as satisfying. A general conclusion of this study is that progress towards goals that are highly related to a person's motivational disposition (i.e., an important achievement goal for a highly achievement-oriented person) should contribute to the satisfaction of motivational needs and thereby the experience of enhanced emotional well-being (Brunstein et al., 1998). Favorable constellations that facilitate goal attainment can act as necessary preconditions for higher levels of well-being, signifying the importance of situational goal characteristics (Brunstein, 1993).

People's concerns are often reflected in their personal autobiographical narratives. Understanding these memories has long been considered a gateway to understanding what motivates people (Woike, 2008). Both implicit and explicit motivational processes have been put forward as organizing mechanisms of personally relevant autobiographical memories. In particular, implicit motives seem to facilitate the recollection of autobiographical experiences, especially when the content is related to the motive in question. When asked to report personally meaningful life experiences, persons with a strong implicit need for achievement or power more often recall events concerned with dominance, mastery, and achievement. Individuals that show a strong implicit need for intimacy, however, are more likely to think of experiences revolving around friendship, love and communal themes (McAdams, 1982, 1985; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; Woike, 1994a; Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999; Woike, Macleod, & Goggin, 2003). Previous research has found that the themes and concerns revealed in memories are closely related to the individual's implicit motivational dispositions in both diary studies (Woike, 1995; Woike & Polo, 2001) and in standardized recall and recognition tasks (Woike, Lavezzary, & Barsky, 2001). The same pattern was recently demonstrated experimentally in a person x situation framework (Woike, 2008; Woike et al., 2009). Individuals who have just re-experienced a success recall more achievement-related words (but not other words) in a free recall task the more they are motivated for implicit achievement – clear evidence for the importance of situational factors for the interplay between motives and memories (Woike et al., 2009).

While implicit motives may often be related to specific autobiographical events that are rich in detail, explicit motives are more likely to be associated with general, self-descriptive autobiographical memories. For example, DeSteno and Salovey (1997) observed that people who were asked to come up with self-descriptions oftentimes chose descriptions that were congruent with their explicit motivational needs. Implicit and explicit motivational processes thus seem differentially related to the recall of personally relevant information: While implicit motives have been shown to be related particularly to affective memorable experiences, explicit motives seem to be related to routine memories – a pattern that was supported experimentally when priming implicit and explicit

motives with a vivid recollection task or open-ended self-descriptions, respectively (Woike, 1995). Woike and colleagues (2003) found that implicit motives act as facilitators for the recall of specific, emotional events, while explicit motives are predictive of routine, self-descriptive events.

Implicit and explicit motives also influence how individuals formulate everyday goals (see Emmons, 1986, 1989), and they have been shown to interact with the specific circumstances of goal pursuit (see Brunstein et al., 1998). Similarly, the manner in which individuals recall their lives is shaped by their implicit and explicit motivational need system (see Woike, 2008). Autobiographical stories in general, but personally relevant memories in particular, may serve as important outlets for daily concerns, emotions, and recurrent themes (Bluck, 2003). We assume that with limited cognitive resources it is natural that individuals do not express concerns about a wide variety of topics, but instead choose the concerns that are central to them. In that selective process, we suggest that motivational needs and the situational characteristics of individual goal pursuit act as organizing principles that guide people's autobiographical recall. In other words, do individuals recall different personal memories at the end of their day depending on whether they have made great strides forward in reaching their goals? Would the affective tone of such memories be different from memories on days when little progress was made? And, most importantly, can a person's motivational disposition help us understand such differences?

The objective of the present study was to address these questions in the context of real-world goal pursuit. More specifically, we tracked a sample of college students as they pursued an active achievement goal of their own nomination. We focused on the implicit need for achievement, the recurrent concern with mastery and attaining standards of excellence (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953) and the explicit self-attributed need for achievement, which is concerned with performance in well-structured task situations (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). The study has a daily diary design, which provides access to rich, open-ended accounts of daily experiences, including goal pursuit and autobiographical memories. In the following sections, we summarize our predictions for two characteristics of autobiographical recollections displayed in the participants' daily memory reports: *memory content* and *affective tone*. Given the dearth of previous longitudinal studies examining the links between explicit and implicit motives, goal pursuit, and autobiographical memories, we specified expected patterns of results rather than a set of specific hypotheses to be tested.

We first turn to the *content* of autobiographical memories. We assume that a person's implicit and explicit motivational disposition towards achievement and the characteristics of goal pursuit (e.g., attainability or daily progress) predict what participants recall in their daily diary entries. One expectation is that individuals high in implicit and explicit achievement will be more concerned with achievement-related, agentic topics in their daily autobiographical memories (Hypothesis 1a). At the same time, such individuals should less often recall communal content in their memories (Hypothesis 1b). The context of goal pursuit (signified by the goal characteristics on a given day) is also assumed to shape the daily recollections of participants: When people make progress towards their achievement goals (Hypothesis 2a) or experience their goal as more attainable (Hypothesis 2b), we expected them to also recall daily memories that are richer in agentic content. At the same time, we expected that progress toward their achievement goal (Hypothesis 3a) and experiencing their goal to be attainable (Hypothesis 3b) would be associated with fewer communal words in people's daily recollections. In other words, the nature of an individual's daily activities will be reflected in the type of memories participants recall in their diary entries: We predicted

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