# The course of motivation

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## Abstract

This article explores the course of motivation in pursuing various goals. We distinguish between two dimensions of motivation: the motivation to attain a focal goal (outcome-focused dimension) and the motivation to "do things right" in the process of reaching that goal (means-focused dimension). We identify the conditions under which the motivation to reach a focal goal increases versus decreases over the course of goal pursuit. We then propose that the motivation to "do things right" follows a u-shaped pattern, such that it is higher at the beginning and end of goal pursuit than in the middle.

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In the course of pursuing their ordinary and extraordinary goals, people often need to perform a series of actions over time. For example, preparing a fancy meal might involve following a multi-step recipe for a few hours, and mastering a new musical piece might require practicing a series of measures over the course of several weeks. For goals requiring the completion of multiple sequential actions over time, an important question arises: how (and why) does motivation change over the course of pursuing such goals? For example, how motivated are the cook and the pianist to perform goal-related tasks at the beginning, middle, or end of their gourmet and musical pursuits?

We define a goal as a cognitive representation of a desired state (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski, 1996) and study the strength of motivation over the course of goal pursuit. Classic motivation research, which has long taken an interest in the course of motivation, has documented that people have a strong motivation to finish what they have started, particularly when they are close to finishing it (Brown, 1948; Hull, 1932, 1934; Zeigarnik, 1927). More recently, research has provided some new insights into this classic problem by identifying

factors that influence the slope of motivation, causing it to increase, decrease, or follow other patterns over the course of goal pursuit. In addition, recent research has taken a closer look at motivation and elaborated on its various dimensions.

Motivation refers to the psychological force that enables action (Lewin, 1935). We suggest that motivation can manifest itself by increased effort and persistence aimed at reaching a goal's desired state (outcome-focused motivation; see, e.g., Brehm & Self, 1989; Locke & Latham, 1990; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Powers, 1973). Motivation can also manifest itself by an increased desire to use proper means in the process of goal pursuit (means-focused motivation; see, e.g., Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Steele, 1988). For example, a student pursuing a sequence of assignments toward completing her course requirements might invest high or low amounts of energy in these assignments, complete them slowly or quickly, attend to the details of her work (e.g., by using her best handwriting) or cut corners (e.g., by copying another student's answers). Each of these criteria would reflect a different aspect of her motivation and could fluctuate in different ways over the course of a term.

In the present article, we explore such changes in the strength of motivation over the course of goal pursuit. We start with an analysis of the course of outcome-focused motivation. In the first section, we discuss the classic goal-gradient effect and

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related findings, which predict an increase in motivation near a goal's end state. In the second section, we discuss variables responsible for decreasing patterns of motivation strength, including the decline in goal accessibility, the presence of multiple goals and the amount of effort invested in goal-related tasks. We then suggest that the nature of inferences drawn from prior goal-related actions—as evidence of commitment or progress—can moderate the course of motivation, leading it to either increase or decrease after initial goal pursuit. In the third section, we explore the means-focused dimension of motivation. We propose that the motivation to do things in a way that maintains one's desired self-concept is independent of the motivation to achieve a goal's outcome and tends to follow a u-shaped course. In Table 1, we summarize our main propositions regarding the variables that influence the course of motivation. Finally, we discuss some implications of these findings for goal pursuit in consumption contexts.

## Increasing motivation

The notion that motivation to reach a goal's end state (outcome-focused motivation) increases as distance to the goal decreases is rooted in the origins of psychological research. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as "the goal-gradient hypothesis" or "goal looms larger effect" and find that people (and other animals) exert more effort and persistence as they get closer to a goal's end state (Brown, 1948; Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999; Hull, 1932; Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006; Nunes & Dreze, 2006). In one of the original tests of this hypothesis, rats in a straight alley progressively increased their running speed as they proceeded from the beginning of the alley toward the food at the end of the alley (Hull, 1934). More recently, Kivetz et al. (2006) demonstrated goal-gradient effects for a variety of human behaviors. They found, for example, that participants who rated songs online to obtain reward certificates increased their efforts as they approached the reward goal. Specifically, as they got closer to receiving the reward, participants increased the frequency of their visits to the rating site, rated more songs per visit, and were less likely to abandon uncompleted rating efforts.

Table 1
A summary of variables that influence the courses of motivation.

| Type of motivation | Course of motivation | Preconditions |
|---|---|---|
| Outcome-focused | Increasing pattern: | • Goal with clear and proximal end state |
| | | • Goal-related actions signal commitment |
| | Decreasing pattern: | • Diminishing goal accessibility |
| | | • Multiple goal context |
| | | • Goal-related actions are effortful |
| | | • Goal-related actions signal progress |
| Means-focused | U-shaped pattern: | • Goal with clear beginning and end states |

These lines of research on the goal-gradient (or goal-looms-larger) effect typically conceive of the construct of motivation in terms of physical and mental effort and measure it by the speed, strength, and perseverance with which people perform actions. Thus Hull (1934) measured how much faster rats ran when they got closer to the food at the end of an alley. Kivetz et al. (2006) measured how much consumers in a frequent-buyer program accelerated their rate of purchases as they progressed toward earning a reward (i.e., decreasing their inter-purchase interval), and how much participants increased their persistence at song-rating tasks. Heath et al. (1999) also used persistence as a measure of motivation. In their study, participants expected an actor with a goal of doing 30 sits-up to persist more (e.g., by doing 5 more sit-ups) when he was closer to (vs. farther from) his goal.

Researchers consider the pulling force of a goal's end state to be one of the basic characteristics of goal-driven processes. Thus Förster et al. (2005) found that active goals enhance the accessibility of goal-related constructs, and that such accessibility persists until goal fulfillment, at which point it is reduced or inhibited. Once the goal is attained, motivation drops below baseline. In one study, participants searched through several sequential blocks of pictures with the goal of finding a picture of glasses followed by a picture of scissors. Lexical decision tasks participants performed after each block of pictures indicated that the accessibility of goal-related words (i.e., words related to "glasses") was greater prior to finding the target pictures and lower after finding them.

We identify several explanations for the pattern of increasing motivation as the distance to the goal decreases. First, early work on Gestalt psychology suggests that the desire for closure might underlie this effect. Specifically, according to the Zeigarnik effect, people are highly motivated to finish what they start. Such motivation accounts for their better recall of uncompleted tasks compared to completed ones. For example, in Zeigarnik's (1927) original study, participants performed 20 short tasks, half of which they did not get a chance to complete because the experimenter purposefully interrupted them. At the end of the study, when asked to recall as many of the tasks as possible, participants recalled more uncompleted than completed tasks. Zeigarnik attributed this superior recall of uncompleted activities to the goal-focused notion of "closure" or the need to finish what one starts. In this conceptualization, an incomplete task corresponds to an unfulfilled goal and leads to a lack of closure. This lack of closure, in turn, produces cognitive activity and memory traces related to the goal, resulting in better recall of the uncompleted tasks. By contrast, a finished task corresponds to a completed goal, which provides closure and switches off any goal-related cognitive effort.

Another account for the increase in motivation as the goal's end state nears refers to the perceived contribution of each successive goal-related action to the completion of the goal. Indeed, the marginal impact of a single successful step (progress) toward goal achievement appears to increase over the course of goal pursuit. In turn, this greater perceived impact of each new progress increases the motivation to make more progress toward the focal goal (Higgins & Brendl, 1995; Koo & Fishbach, 2010). Specifically, if the completion of a goal requires a given number