



Goal motivation and the subjective perception of past and future obstacles[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Want-to (vs. *have-to*) motivation has been found to lead to more successful goal attainment and reports of fewer obstacles. However, to date, only correlational research has been conducted. The present research experimentally examines the effects of motivation on the subjective perception of the frequency and disruptiveness of obstacles, and explores whether the results differ based on time (past vs. future obstacles). In four studies, participants were randomly assigned to *want-to* or *have-to* motivation for the goal of eating healthy and reported on the frequency and disruptiveness of obstacles encountered in the past week or anticipated in the coming week. Time moderated the effect of motivation such that *want-to* motivation led to the perception of fewer and less disruptive obstacles, but only for future (not past) obstacles. The possible reasons for this discrepancy, and the implications for the relationship between *want-to* motivation and goal pursuit are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Individuals set goals in almost all areas of their life, whether it be health (“lose weight”), work (“be more organized”), sports (“exercise one hour per day”), or relationships (“spend more time with my partner”). Unfortunately, although individuals commonly set goals, they also frequently fail to attain them (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). One possible explanation for these failures is that people encounter obstacles along the way. For example, someone with the goal to lose weight might encounter obstacles such as feeling too tired to work out, having a lot of work to do, or having too much junk food in the house. But why is it that some people experience more obstacles, while others can progress smoothly towards their goals? In the present paper, we examine this question by looking at the role of goal motivation in the subjective perception of obstacles.

1.1. Goal motivation

Previous research shows that motivation – the reasons why a goal is selected and pursued – influences goal pursuit (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Reasons for pursuing a goal include finding the goal interesting and enjoyable (intrinsic

motivation), finding it important (identified motivation), because the goal has become a part of the individual's core identity (integrated motivation), because of feelings of shame and obligation (introjected motivation), or because of external reasons (external motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic, identified and integrated are forms of autonomous or *want-to* motivation, while controlled or *have-to* motivation encompasses introjected and external regulations (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, Hope, & Koestner, 2015). In other words, *want-to* motivation can be understood as behaving with a full sense of volition and choice, while *have-to* motivation can be defined as arising from internal and external pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2008).¹

Want-to motivation is associated with positive outcomes including greater persistence, more positive affect, enhanced performance, and greater psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). These benefits have been found across many domains such as school (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000), work (e.g., Fernet, Guay, & Senecal, 2004), and health (e.g., Pelletier, Dion, Slovenic-D'Angelo, & Reid, 2004). In particular, research consistently shows that *want-to* motivation is beneficial in goal pursuit, leading to more successful goal attainment (Koestner et al., 2008; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). These positive effects of *want-to* motivation are still observed after controlling for several other measures of initial motivation (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999). Although the importance of *want-to* motivation for goal pursuit is well-established, the

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¹ We chose to use the terms “*want-to*” and “*have-to*” to maintain consistency with previous work (Milyavskaya et al., 2015), and to make this article accessible to a wider audience beyond self-determination theory (SDT) researchers (by avoiding the specialized terms used by SDT).

mechanisms for this relationship are not well understood. While initial research has suggested that *want-to* motivation is associated with overall greater sustained effort (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), recent studies have proposed that *want-to* motivation is characterized by more automatic, effortless goal pursuit (Milyavskaya et al., 2015; Werner, Milyavskaya, Foxen-Craft & Koestner, 2016; Note: the theoretical rationale for this is outside of the scope of the current paper, but can be found in Milyavskaya et al., 2015).

1.2. Obstacles

Recent research on the ease of goal pursuit shows that people report encountering fewer obstacles when pursuing goals for *want-to* reasons (Milyavskaya et al., 2015). Obstacles can be defined as “interfering forces that prevent people from reaching their goals” (Marguc, Forster, & Van Kleef, 2011, p.883). For example, living in a house where other family members regularly buy junk food might be perceived as an obstacle for someone who has the goal of eating healthy. Obstacles have different properties and can thus be assessed in two ways: their frequency (i.e., the number of times they are encountered) and their disruptiveness (i.e., how strongly they interfere with the goal; Milyavskaya et al., 2015). Milyavskaya and colleagues (2015) found that *want-to* motivation was linked to individuals experiencing fewer obstacles, but not expending more or less effort on pursuing personally important goals. *Have-to* motivation showed the opposite pattern: it was associated with both greater obstacles and more effort. Consistent with previous research, they also found that *want-to* motivation led to better goal progress. Although *want-to* motivation was associated with reporting fewer obstacles, it is unclear whether this occurred because people actually encountered fewer obstacles, or because motivation influenced participants' subjective perception of obstacles such that fewer obstacles were perceived. For example, does someone with *want-to* motivation for eating healthy encounter fewer opportunities to indulge in unhealthy foods (e.g., receive fewer invitations to go out for fast food)? Or does (s)he subjectively re-interpret available opportunities to indulge in unhealthy food as an opportunity to showcase healthy eating (e.g., buying a salad as opposed to the Big Mac)? If the latter were true, the outing to the fast food restaurant would not be perceived as an obstacle or the obstacle would be perceived as easy to overcome.

Previous research has found that active goals (Higgins, 1996) influence cognitive processes including attention, evaluation, and memory (e.g., Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). Additionally, research has found that when a goal is activated, stimuli related to other competing goals become less salient (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002), and people automatically avoid temptation-related related words (Fishbach & Shah, 2006). In other words, having an activated goal results in automatic cognitive processes designed to promote effective goal pursuit. However, that research has not considered the cognitive consequences of goal motivation (the reasons for goal pursuit) of the activated goal. The present research fills this void by experimentally testing how motivation influences the subjective perception of obstacles.

1.3. Past vs. future

The timing of obstacles may matter. Thoughts about future events evoke stronger emotions (Caruso, 2010), are seen as more intentional (Burns, Caruso, & Bartels, 2012), prototypical (Kane, Van Boven, & McGraw, 2012), and controllable (Caouette, Wohl, & Peetz, 2012) than thoughts about past events. For example, in a study by Ferrante, Giroto, Stragà, and Walsh (2013), thoughts about a hypothetical challenge to a goal (failing a task) focused more on controllable aspects of the event (how failure could be avoided through one's own actions) when this challenge was anticipated to occur in the future, but focused more on uncontrollable aspects (how failure could be avoided by external circumstances) when it had already occurred. Similarly, morally unjust events elicit stronger emotions if they have yet to occur than if they

already happened – arguably because future events reflect a situation where one's own actions can still influence the outcome (Caouette et al., 2012; Caruso, 2010).

When considering obstacles that might interfere with a person's goals, anticipated obstacles should likewise be perceived as more controllable than recalled obstacles. Past obstacles have little potential to influence future actions, whereas future obstacles may threaten successful goal pursuit. Someone who experiences *want-to* motivation may therefore be particularly likely to guard against or see future obstacles as competing goals, but be less concerned with past obstacles. We sought to investigate, in an exploratory fashion, whether looking at past vs. future obstacles made a difference in the subjective perception of their frequency and disruptiveness.

1.4. Present studies

In four studies, we investigated the effect of motivation (*want-to* vs. *have-to*) on the subjective perception of frequency and disruptiveness of obstacles, and whether the results differed based on time (perception of past vs. future obstacles). In studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to list all obstacles to the goal of eating healthy that they encountered in the past week (study 1) or anticipated encountering in the coming week (study 2). In studies 3 and 4, participants were asked to rate from a given list all obstacles to the goal of eating healthy encountered in the past week (study 3) or anticipated in the coming week (study 4). In all studies, participants were also asked to rate the obstacles on their disruptiveness. The goal of eating healthy was used because it is endorsed by a large majority of individuals (Milyavskaya & Nadolny, 2016) and people endorse this goal for both *want-to* and *have-to* reasons (Pelletier et al., 2004).

First, we had two competing hypotheses regarding the effect of motivation on the subjective perception of obstacles: we hypothesized that, compared to *have-to* motivation, *want-to* motivation would lead to perceiving obstacles as either (a) equally frequent but less disruptive or (b) both less frequent and less disruptive. Although Milyavskaya et al. (2015) found that *want-to* motivation was related to experiencing fewer obstacles, they combined the measures of frequency and disruptiveness since the two were highly correlated. By conceptualizing disruptiveness differently as to better differentiate it from frequency, we sought to investigate whether the subjective perception of fewer obstacles can be explained by a perception of obstacles as less disruptive, or as both less frequent and less disruptive.

Second, we were interested in whether the above predictions would hold for both past and future obstacles. On one hand, motivation could be expected to affect perceptions and subjective recall regardless of the time frame. Alternatively, future obstacles might loom larger than already passed obstacles (Burns et al., 2012; Caouette et al., 2012; Caruso, 2010), such that subjective perceptions of future obstacles matter more than subjective perception of past obstacles and, consequently, vary more depending on the type of motivation.²

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Four studies were conducted in parallel on different samples, using a similar procedure. In all four studies, participants were asked to complete a writing prime (randomly assigned to priming for *want-to* or *have-to* motivation) for the goal of eating healthy. In studies 1 and 2, they were then asked to list all obstacles to the goal of eating healthy

² The hypotheses and exploratory questions examined in this study, as well as all analytical decisions (including sample size considerations, criteria for participant exclusion) and planned analyses were pre-registered on OSF at osf.io/kgwvp.

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