The differential effects of incidental anger and sadness on goal regulation

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A B S T R A C T

Individuals commonly enter a task domain with pre-existing emotions. These pre-existing emotions, known as incidental emotions, can potentially shape subsequent goal-setting behaviors without individuals' awareness, and in unique ways based on the characteristics associated with each emotion. Existing literature, however, does little to inform us about the specific effects of these emotions on goal-setting behaviors. In this paper, we draw on the theory of self-regulation of action and affect to argue that incidental anger and sadness originating from an ostensibly unrelated domain will have distinct effects on individuals' goal-setting behaviors on a task. The theory suggests that anger is associated with approach behavioral tendencies while sadness is associated with deactivation behavioral tendencies. Hence, we hypothesize that individuals who are experiencing anger from an unrelated source will experience higher self-efficacy and in turn set higher goals after receiving task feedback as compared to individuals who are experiencing sadness. Results from a field study and an experimental study, both with undergraduate samples, supported our hypotheses. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Emotions and goal regulation

Goals are critical determinants of successful motivation and learning because they drive, guide, and sustain the effort necessary to achieve an objective (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981). Most of the earlier research on goal setting focused on cognitive mechanisms that examined how individuals consciously guide their intentions and actions through goal setting (Locke, 1968), but more recent research has begun to examine the role of emotions in influencing goal regulatory behaviors. These studies mostly focused on the role of *integral emotions* (i.e., emotions induced by factors directly related to the task at hand) in the context of feedback response and goal regulation and have uncovered fascinating dynamics between emotions and goal processes (Ilies & Judge, 2005; Ilies, Judge, & Wagner, 2010). For instance, emotions act as mediators linking feedback to goal revision (Ilies & Judge, 2005), and as outcomes of success and failure during goal pursuit (Carver & Scheier, 2011).

Despite this progress in understanding the roles that affect and emotions play in goal pursuit, substantial ambiguities exist regarding the relationships between distinct emotions and goal setting. In particular, individuals commonly enter a task

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context bringing with them emotions that originate from unrelated events or experiences from the non-work domain. These pre-existing emotions, known as *incidental emotions*, are omnipresent, and have the power to shape subsequent thoughts and behaviors without individuals' awareness (Kiefer, 2005; Leith & Baumeister, 1996; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Schwarz & Clore, 1983, 2003). Existing research, therefore, misses out on a comprehensive understanding of the interconnections between goal-setting and emotions by overlooking the influences of such incidental emotions. Our research aims to address this gap and to shed light on the black box between incidental emotions and goal-regulatory behaviors by examining whether and how the negative emotions of anger and sadness that individuals bring with them from an unrelated source into a task setting shape their feedback response and goal setting behaviors.

Our motivation for looking at the influences of incidental anger and sadness on goal-regulatory behavior is also fueled by our observation that little research effort has been made to differentiate the effects of various discrete emotions on goal setting, despite the unique distinctions between these emotions noted by existing emotion research (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Levine, 1995; Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007). The studies that have documented the powerful lingering effects of emotions in influencing a person's motivational states (Sanz-Vergel, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2012; Sonnentag & Binnewies, 2013) mostly examined these emotions collectively under the umbrella of positive or negative affect. Hence, they do little to inform us about whether the discrete emotions, such as anger or sadness, that individuals bring with them into a task setting exercise similar or different effects on their goal-regulatory behaviors. For example, do *sadness* about a friend's demise and *anger* from an encounter with a rude neighbor drive individuals to respond in the same way to subsequent performance feedback provided to them in a work setting? The failure to examine the differential effects of these incidental negative emotions on goal setting behaviors is a critical oversight because, unlike positive emotions which trigger broaden-and-build tendencies and impact consequences more slowly, negative emotions trigger more immediate and noticeable changes in an individual's responses and behaviors (Fredrickson, 2001).

In addition, anger and sadness are two negative emotions that people experience very frequently in life (Oatley & Duncan, 1994; Simon & Nath, 2004), and they are known to differ markedly in their subsequent psychological and behavioral responses related to self-regulation—such as perceived control, attempts to restore the situation, and withdrawal from a situation (Crisp, Heuston, Farr, & Turner, 2007; Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Levine, 1996). Subsuming anger and sadness indiscriminately under the umbrella of negative affect obfuscates the unique effects of each emotion on goal setting behaviors, and significantly limits a comprehensive understanding of how exactly each of these emotions impacts self-regulation in an achievement setting.

The above reasons highlight the importance of examining the influences of specific incidental negative emotions on self-regulation. Our contention is also in line with the directions taken by previous research on emotions and self-regulation. For example, Aarts and Elliot (2012) argued that studies of self-regulation should investigate the links between emotions and self-regulation, because this will enhance our understanding of the motivational, affective, and cognitive systems of self-regulation. Carver and Scheier (2011) emphasized the importance of a nuanced approach to understand the relationship between different emotions and their implications for self-regulation processes, since different emotions appear to trigger different goal-directed behaviors. Finally, in their meta-analysis of affective disposition and job performance, Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, and Haynes (2009) argued that while they found an overall negative relationship between negative affect and job performance, more empirical studies are needed to understand the different types of negative emotions and their unique relationships with motivational processes.

1.2. Overview of current research

Going beyond previous studies that focused on the effects of generalized negative affect and moods on self-regulation, we draw on Carver and Scheier's (2011) theory of self-regulation of action and affect to argue that anger and sadness originating from one's personal domain will have distinct effects on individuals' goal setting behaviors in an unrelated task context. The theory argues that anger is associated with approach-oriented behavioral tendencies, while sadness is associated with deactivation behavioral tendencies (Carver & Scheier, 2011). Applying these to the goal setting paradigm, we expect the incidental anger (as compared to incidental sadness) that individuals bring with them into a task context to predict higher self-efficacy and in turn higher goal setting behaviors following the receipt of feedback.

We conducted two studies to investigate the effects of anger and sadness on goal setting. In Study 1, we examined how the state levels of anger and sadness that students bring with them into the classroom influence the level of goals they set for weekly quizzes. In Study 2, we delved deeper into the causal mechanisms of anger, sadness, and goal levels by conducting a laboratory study to manipulate anger and sadness to investigate their effects on self-efficacy and goal levels over multiple waves of an anagram task performance.

2. Study 1 hypotheses development

2.1. Self-Regulation of action and affect

The self-regulation of action and affect theory by Carver and Scheier (2011) suggests emotions such as anger and sadness are closely related to goal-regulatory processes. More importantly, the theory notes key differences between anger and sadness in relation to their motivational and regulatory properties. Anger is generally defined as an active negative emotion