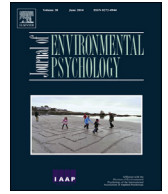




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Disordered environments prompt mere goal pursuit

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ABSTRACT

People have a strong need to perceive their environment as orderly and structured. Among the various strategies to defend against the aversive experience of disorder, the authors propose and test the novel hypothesis that people may reaffirm a sense of order by setting and pursuing goals that may be unrelated to the source of disorder. In a series of (lab and field) studies, the authors show that when environmental cues trigger an experience of disorder, or when people have a chronic need for order, and hence when they are motivated to restore perceptions of order, people are more attracted to clear, well-defined goals and motivated to attain them. Moreover, the authors show that the effect of a disordered environment on goal pursuit is driven by the need to reaffirm perceptions of order, and—conversely—that setting and pursuing goals is indeed functional in promoting a sense of order.

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During the so-called “Blitz”—the terror bombing campaign on cities in Great Britain that created destruction, chaos and mayhem during the early years of World War II—the British government issued a propaganda campaign featuring large, bright red printed posters urging its citizens to “Keep Calm and Carry On”. Hence, the now iconic posters advocated people to control their nerves, and, importantly, to move on pursuing their daily, mundane, goals. Could such an advocacy to tend to one’s daily business, which probably did nothing directly to remove the source of chaos and disorder, have been effective in restoring a sense of purpose and order in the British people of the time? While that may seem unlikely and while, to our knowledge, no systematic study has evaluated the impact of the campaign, the present research will demonstrate that such an advice to carry on pursuing one’s goals even if these are unrelated to any environmental source of disorder might be less naïve and inadequate than may appear at first glance and may actually serve to promote a sense of order under these conditions.

In this research we ask whether and how an environmentally-induced need for order influences the likelihood that people set and pursue goals—regardless of the goals’ relation to the source of disorder—as a means to cope with the experience of lack of order,

predictability, and regularity. In addition, we examine the underlying assumption of whether a disordered compared to ordered environment indeed increases the need for order, thereby boosting the need to regain a sense of order, and that a high need for order drives the effect of a disordered environment on mere goal pursuit. In addition, we explore two logical extensions of our reasoning and test whether the effect mainly holds when the goal is clear rather than vague and whether cues signaling environmental disorder promote actual, overt goal pursuit. Finally, we test the functionality of the proposed mechanism and examine whether the mere pursuit of goals is an effective way to reaffirm perceptions of order after exposure to a disordered environment.

1. The need to reduce disorder

While individual, situational, and even cultural differences certainly exist, people are generally believed to have a fundamental need to view the world as an ordered and structured place composed of predictable cause and effect relations (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kruglanski, 1989; Landau et al., 2004). Such perceptions are considered one of the most important factors governing people’s well-being. The experience of order and nonrandomness are key contributors to healthy psychological and physical functioning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). In contrast, lacking understanding of the regularities that govern the environment and perceiving it as

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unmanageable and random is a highly aversive state triggering fear, apathy, and withdrawal (Whalen, 1998). Hence, it is not surprising that people actively try to avoid or remedy perceptions that the world is a disordered place, and strive to maintain beliefs in order and structure (Kelley, 1971; Skinner, 1996).

To protect themselves from the unsettling feelings that the experience of disorder may incite, people have developed a myriad of strategies to provide a comforting sense that the world is not ruled by chaos. Since it is not always feasible to directly address the source of such disorder (as in the case of British citizens facing the bombing attacks on their cities in WWII), people may rely on compensatory sources of order (Antonovsky, 1979; Kay et al., 2008), and more specifically on imbuing the self and/or the environment with increased power and influence (Kay et al., 2008; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010). For example, research shows that one particular response to a perceived lack of order is to see patterns in the environment, even if there are none (Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010). More specifically, a threat to order has been found to make people prone to perceive illusory patterns in grainy images, or to increase susceptibility to conspiratorial and superstitious beliefs (Greenaway, Louis, & Hornsey, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). An alternative response to lacking a sense of order is to have faith in abstract and controlling external forces, such as governments, institutions, and organizations (Jost et al., 2004; Shepherd & Kay, 2012), or an interventionist God (Kay et al., 2008). In sum, these studies suggest that a perceived threat to order and structure prompts responses aimed at regaining a sense of order by converting a fuzzy world into a more understandable and predictable one, thereby relying on compensatory strategies.

It is interesting to note that these and other studies that have examined responses to disorder mainly focused on the sometimes irrational, exotic, and even bizarre strategies that people resort to in order to regain a sense of order. But if maintaining a sense of order is so engrained in our nature, and if threats to order are so omnipresent in our environment (Antonovsky, 1979; Kelley, 1971), then a straightforward question that arises is: are these responses to see patterns in chaos or to revert to conspiracies, superstitions, or a controlling divine power the only, let alone the most prevalent strategies in our toolbox to cope with chaos and lack of environmental order? We propose that while certainly in our repertoire, a sole focus on these would obscure that there are more mundane, concrete, and probably more prevalent and typical strategies that we employ to regain a sense of order. More specifically, we propose that mere goal setting and goal striving (we use mere goal pursuit as an umbrella term) in and of itself has a powerful psychological effect in satisfying a need for order and hence will alleviate an environmentally induced sense of disorder. Importantly, we propose that goals and mere goal pursuit serve this function regardless of their specific objectives and hence also help in regaining a sense of structure and order when they are unrelated to the source of disorder. We develop our reasoning in the next section.

2. Goal pursuit provides order

Goals are typically conceived to be concrete, domain specific representations of desirable end states that people want to attain and/or undesirable ones that they try to avoid (Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008). As a motivational corollary, goal pursuit may provide a sense of order because it makes salient various intrapersonal 'anchors' that reduce the experience of disorder and lack of structure. More specifically, when people engage in goal pursuit, it highlights at least two reference points: where they come from and where they are going, but also what it is they are pursuing (goal

content), how to do it (the operationalization of means), and why to do it (the motivational drive it serves; Baumgartner & Pieters, 2008). In sum, following Skinner (1996), goals and goal pursuit provide a sense of order because they specify concrete agents, means and ends, the building blocks of a perception of order and structure. As a result, engaging in mere goal pursuit, regardless of its specific objectives may contribute to experiencing an effective antidote to the perception of disorder – a perception of regularity, coherence, and structure.

The specific 'theatre of operations' of the notions outlined in the present paper is the consumer sphere and, more specifically, the extent to which contextual cues in the retail environment can induce a sense of chaos and disorder on the one hand, and the extent to which engaging in goal-directed consumer behavior on the other can provide perceptions of order. This context was selected because it provides a compelling illustration of the proposition that both threats to a sense of order and strategies to remedy them are not particular to exceptional events such as natural disasters or bombing attacks, but constitute frequently encountered, mundane phenomena that are part and parcel of modern life. An apt illustration of this point is the work by Cutright and colleagues (2012; Cutright, Bettman, & Fitzsimons, 2013) who have shown that marketing stimuli such as brand logos with clear boundaries can and indeed do provide people with a sense of structure. In addition and related, studies have also focused on the motivational (side) effects of architectural features of the retail environment (Doucé, Poels, Janssens, & De Backer, 2013). In this context, and in line with our notions, studies have shown that narrow store aisles lead to compensatory reactions aimed at regaining a sense of control (Chae & Zhu, 2014; Levav & Zhu, 2009). The notion that spatial confinement is associated with compensatory behavior dovetails nicely with the finding of Aylott and Mitchell (1999) that the most invasive stressors in the retail environment (i.e., crowding, bad store layout, and ambient noise) have one common denominator: disorder. Hence, these studies suggest that not only extreme threats to order but also subtle, omnipresent signs of disorder, in particular disorder cues people encounter each day in the retail environment, may induce a need for order. Moreover, this research suggests that people can remedy a sense of disorder by turning to compensatory responses in that retail context.

In sum, and integrating previous arguments, we propose that if the mere pursuit of goals satisfies a need for order, we should be able to observe two phenomena: 1. When exposed to a disordered environment people experience a heightened need for order which prompts an increased tendency to set and pursue goals, not necessarily related to the source of disorder and 2. To the extent that goal pursuit provides an effective means of coping with a sense of disorder, such goal pursuit should be able to reduce the acute need for order in response to environmental cues signaling disorder. By implication of course, when exposed to an ordered environment, and hence when there is no need to regain a sense of order, environmental cues should be less consequential for goal pursuit. Please note that our reasoning implies that we conceive of the causal relationship between goal pursuit and need for order as bidirectional, with need for order inducing a motivation for goal pursuit, and goal pursuit, in turn, satisfying (and hence lowering) an experienced need for order.

Taken together, the present research aims to extend previous research on compensatory control strategies and research on goal pursuit by integrating both streams of research and establishing the impact of perceptions of environmental disorder on goal pursuit. Moreover, this work examines the conditions under which this effect is more or less pronounced. In so doing, our research

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