



Some goals just feel easier: Self-concordance leads to goal progress through subjective ease, not effort[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study was to examine whether subjective ease of goal pursuit would mediate the relation between an individual's motivation for pursuing a goal and their subsequent goal progress. Toward the beginning of a university semester, participants ($n = 176$) identified three goals they planned to pursue throughout the semester and reported their motivation for pursuing each of them. Participants then indicated, at two monthly follow-ups, how easy and natural it felt to pursue these goals and how much effort they were putting into attaining them. At the end of the semester, participants reported on their goal progress. Within-person analyses indicated that self-concordant goals were perceived as being easier to pursue relative to an individual's other goals. Using multilevel structural equation modeling, results indicated that subjective ease, but not effort, mediated the relation between motivation and goal progress, such that people were more likely to successfully accomplish self-concordant goals because pursuing those goals was perceived as being more effortless, and not because more effort was exerted. Discussion focuses on the implications and future directions for research on subjective effort and goal pursuit.

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1. Introduction

Dave has recently set a goal to complete a marathon. Running has always been one of his favorite hobbies and so he often competes in local races. In order to train for the marathon, he significantly increased the amount of time he spent running, often crushing his weekly milestones building up to the necessary 42.2 km. While to some this may seem like a daunting, or even impossible task, if you were to ask Dave, he would tell you that he was able to do it with great ease, often referring to being “in the zone” while running. Given the difficulty of this goal, how is it that Dave was able to surmount this task with seemingly little effort? The purpose of the present study is to investigate whether an individual's motivation can influence both subjective ease and exerted effort in pursuing their goals, which in turn affect goal progress.

While there are many different perspectives of self-regulation (e.g., Fujita, 2011), an important predictor of goal attainment is the reasons *why* a person is pursuing a goal. Research based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that people's

reasons for pursuing a goal can vary from autonomous (because you truly want to) to controlled (because you feel like you have to). Within the literature on goal pursuit, the term self-concordance describes the extent to which an individual feels a sense of autonomy when pursuing a goal (Milyavskaya, Nadolny, & Koestner, 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999). This type of motivation stems from an individual's own values and interests, and therefore the goal is pursued with a greater sense of volition. Such reasons may include pursuing a goal because it is inherently fun or enjoyable (*intrinsic*), it is aligned with an individual's broader life goals (*integrated*), and/or it is personally meaningful and important (*identified*). In contrast, goals that are pursued to comply with internal or external demands tend to engender the feeling of being controlled. Such goals tend to be less representative of an individual's own interests and values, and instead are often pursued to quell anxiety and guilt (*introjected*) or to gain approval from others (*external*). According to self-determination theory, these various types of motivation fall along a continuum (Ryan & Connell, 1989), representing the extent to which an individual functions in a relatively autonomous versus controlled manner. As such, self-concordance is typically calculated by combining the average of the autonomous reasons with the reflected average of the controlled reasons (e.g., Milyavskaya, Nadolny, et al., 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

Research has found that pursuing self-concordant goals is associated with better goal progress and ultimately attainment (Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, Hope, & Koestner, 2015; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon &

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Houser-Marko, 2001). However, the mechanism by which this occurs is currently subject to debate (Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, et al., 2015). The dominant explanation thus far comes from the self-concordance model, which suggests that pursuing self-concordant goals is associated with sustained effort, which in turn predicts goal attainment (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). For example, Vasalampi, Nurmi, Jokisaari, and Salmela-Aro (2012) found that pursuing a self-concordant educational goal was associated with the effort students invested into achieving that goal. This effort was associated with goal progress, which subsequently predicted successful transition into university. Along with the initial research on the self-concordance model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), these findings suggest that the amount of conscious effort an individual puts into achieving their goal is an important aspect of self-concordant goal pursuit. However, recent research (Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, et al., 2015) has challenged this claim, suggesting automatic goal pursuit as a potential alternative mechanism explaining why self-concordant goals are more likely to be attained.

While the self-concordance model and other theories of self-regulation (e.g. Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010) have emphasized the importance of effort, recent research suggests that effective self-regulation is a function of more automatic processes (e.g., Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015). For example, it was found that people high in trait self-control are more likely to achieve their goals without being distracted because they are able to make decisions in a more automatic way (Gillebaart & de Ridder, 2015) or rely on beneficial habits (Galla & Duckworth, 2015), consequently requiring less effort. It thus seems that successful goal pursuit may be a product of more effortless, rather than effortful, processes.

Initial evidence reconciling this proposition with the self-concordance model was provided by Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, and Gagnon (2008), who found that students who pursued self-concordant goals reported greater use of implementation intentions, subsequently making more goal progress. In other words, individuals who pursue self-concordant goals do not have to consciously think about decisions related to their goals because responding is more automatic, therefore buffering against potential distractions (e.g. Brandstätter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001, Gollwitzer, 1999). Furthermore, Milyavskaya, Inzlicht and colleagues (2015) found that self-concordant goals were associated with an implicit bias away from goal-disruptive temptations – for example, people who report eating healthy for autonomous reasons tended to have a more positive hedonic response to healthy food and a more negative response to unhealthy food. In a subsequent study, they also found that people who pursued self-concordant goals reported experiencing fewer obstacles, which in turn enabled them to make more progress on their goals without needing to exert more effort. In contrast, people who pursued discordant goals reported both experiencing more obstacles and exerting more effort, which ended up impeding actual goal progress, likely because all of the effort was used to overcome the obstacles. While these studies indicate that self-concordance is associated with the perception of fewer obstacles and temptations, so far the latter study has been the only one to empirically examine this mechanism in relation to actual goal progress. This leads us to our current study, whereby we sought to more directly examine whether self-concordant goals would in fact be experienced as more effortless, and whether this would lead to more progress made toward attaining such goals.

2. Present study

The present study was designed to extend the work of Milyavskaya, Inzlicht, et al. (2015) by examining the longitudinal impact of self-concordance on goal progress as a function of subjective ease and actual effort. Specifically, participants were asked to identify three personal goals and their reasons for pursuing them. Then, over the course of the semester they were asked to report how easy it felt to pursue those goals, as well as how much effort they were actually exerting in order to attain them. At the end of the semester, participants then

reported on their goal progress. We hypothesized that goals that are more self-concordant would feel easier to pursue. We also expected this subjective ease of goal pursuit to mediate the relation between self-concordance and goal progress, such that goals that feel easier to pursue would be more likely to be accomplished. While we did expect people to make more progress on those goals where they exerted more effort, we did not expect self-concordance to lead people to use more effort, and as such did not expect effort to act as the mechanism responsible for the greater attainment of self-concordant goals.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 193 undergraduate students who took part in a semester-long study of goal pursuit. At the start of the winter semester, participants completed a 1.5-hour laboratory component where they completed measures related to their goals and their personality. Three online follow-up questionnaires were sent out and completed at 4-week intervals (in February, March, and April), each taking approximately 20 min to complete. At each follow-up, participants were reminded of their goals and responded to questions related to goal pursuit. We used effort and ease of goal pursuit assessed in February and March, and goal progress assessed in April. One hundred and seventy-six participants (120 females, 36 males, 20 did not report gender) ages 18–35 ($M = 20.16$, $SD = 2.44$) completed at least one of the three follow-ups.¹

4. Measures

4.1. Goal descriptions

Participants were asked to list three personal goals that they planned to pursue during the semester, using the following instructions (e.g., Koestner et al., 2008): “Personal goals are projects and concerns that people think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete or succeed at. They may be more or less difficult to implement; require only a few or a complex sequence of steps; represent different areas of a person’s life; and be more or less time consuming, attractive, or urgent. Please think of three personal goals that you plan to carry out this semester.” Examples of goals listed by participants include “get a 3.6GPA”, “find employment”, “improve my health”, and “learn French.”

4.2. Goal self-concordance

After each goal, participants were asked to rate their motivation for pursuing that goal on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all for this reason*) to 7 (*completely for this reason*) on four items that assessed external, introjected, identified and intrinsic reasons for goal pursuit (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). As is commonly done with these items (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), a combined score of relative autonomy was computed by averaging the intrinsic and identified scores with the reverse of the external and introjected scores.

¹ Other research with this sample has examined the role of inspiration on goal progress (Milyavskaya, Ianakieva, Foxen-Craft, Colantuoni & Koestner, 2012), the effects of psychological need satisfaction and well-being (Milyavskaya, Philippe, & Koestner, 2013), trait perfectionism and goal pursuit (Powers, Milyavskaya, & Koestner, 2012), and support (Koestner, Powers, Milyavskaya, Carbonneau, & Hope, 2015). None of the other studies have examined the effects of goal motivation on goal progress, and there is no overlap between the content and the hypotheses of the present study and the other studies that have used this sample.

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