



## Feeling good at the right time: Why people value predictability in goal attainment

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Does information on upcoming goal attainment spoil some of its benefits?
- People hold a script that positive emotion is experienced after a goal is attained.
- Learning that a goal is going to be attained disrupts this script.
- And results in mellowed happiness and lower goal evaluation.
- Reawakening positive emotion after early knowledge of goal attainment is difficult.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 27 August 2013

Revised 23 February 2014

Accepted 14 May 2014

Available online 21 May 2014

#### Keywords:

Self-regulation

Script

Value

Emotion

Happiness

### ABSTRACT

We investigate whether information on upcoming goal attainment spoils some of the benefits of attaining the goal, because people hold a script suggesting they should feel happy at the “right” time; that is, after the goal is attained. We find that people falsely recall sequences of events in a way that corresponds to a script of feeling happy upon goal attainment rather than upon learning that a goal will be attained (Study 1). The disruption of the goal-attainment script results in mellowed happiness and lower goal evaluation (Studies 2–4). We conclude that because of their expectation to feel happy only upon goal attainment, people experience mellowed positive emotion and goal evaluation when they learn that a goal will be attained. Reawakening positive emotion after having had early knowledge of goal attainment appears to be difficult.

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Consider the goal of gaining admission to college. A student who works hard to attain this goal is likely to form expectations about the sequence of events, or “script” that would occur should he or she be admitted. Imagine that the student expects a notification letter in the mail, but receives a notification email to be followed up by a letter a few days later. Upon reading the acceptance email, the student may face a distinctly odd dilemma. Despite gaining admission to college, his or her expectations about the process were disrupted. The student may in some sense be left “waiting” for the official letter to arrive before fully experiencing happiness related to this goal. We suggest that this student will in fact experience a lower degree of happiness because the two-part admission notification policy violated a script. As a result, this student will value the admission less if the script was not violated. We suggest more generally that people subscribe to the notion that happiness should be experienced at the “right time” according to the

script and violation of the script decreases positive emotion and valuation.

People commonly experience positive emotion when positive things happen to them, for example when they attain a goal. We suggest that over and above the happiness that attaining a goal brings, positive emotion is also affected by the way the goal was attained. This may occur because of goal scripts. Scripts are cognitive structures that organize prior knowledge of events that tend to occur one after the other with regularity (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977). Goal scripts contain information on the process of pursuing a desired end-point (i.e., a goal), including the resulting emotional experience. People form scripts in part to answer a basic question: ‘How should I react when an event that could happen, in fact does?’ In the case of goal scripts, a basic component of the script is, ‘I should experience positive emotion after I have attained a goal.’ At times, however, information on goal attainment can be learned unexpectedly early in the process. If people judge attainment information so early as to be premature, they may act as though they are “waiting” for script to be fulfilled before experiencing full happiness. We suggest that because

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of this tendency to “wait for the right time,” people will experience mellowed happiness and evaluate the goal less positively compared to a situation in which people learn attainment information when and as they expect it. In what follows, we discuss our theory in greater detail.

### The scripted nature of goals

People perceive many of the goals they pursue as following a particular order of events, which we refer to as “goal scripts” (see also “plan schema;” Bower, 1982; Lichtenstein & Brewer, 1980). People organize knowledge of goals and goal-related actions according to generic “roadmaps” for how to behave and what to expect when they proceed on track toward their goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). In particular, people have in mind clearly delineated sequences of events that need to happen before they can experience goal attainment. Importantly, having expectations about how events will unfold is distinctly different from having expectations about these events’ outcomes. To return to our opening examples, the admitted student will have formed expectations both about how she will be notified of the admission decision (be it via email and official letter or via email only) and also about her chances of admission. We study the former, and suggest that goal scripts not only contain expectations about the sequence of goal-related events, but also one’s own emotional responses to those events.

Research on schemas and scripts informs our reasoning. People routinely interpret experiences through the lens of precomputed scripts (Hintzman, 1986; Medin & Schaffer, 1978). Script theory suggests that people represent familiar situations in memory as sequences of events, which in turn activate learned affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that are in line with these representations (Berkowitz, 1990; Fiske & Linville, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Snyder & Uranowitz, 1978; Tomkins, 1987). Norm theory also suggests that people determine their affective reactions to many events by assessing how typical these events are within a given context, and that people come to define typicality by recruiting stored knowledge learned from similar situations encountered in the past (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). The ability to view the world through these mental representations allows people to be frugal in exerting attention and energy when understanding and responding to stimuli (Cacioppo, Petty, Kao, & Rodriguez, 1986; Chaiken, 1987; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Tetlock, 1983). People thus analyze stimuli in real time only when expectations are violated and an unusual event occurs (Bartlett, 1932; Graesser, Gordon, & Sawyer, 1979; Klein, Cosmides, Tooby, & Chance, 2002; Schank, 1982; Sherry & Schacter, 1987). In other words, scripts are mental roadmaps that “tell” people how to react to, including how to feel about, various events.

Notably, although scripts are efficient they also have a rigid structure. If scripted events occasionally deviate from the routine, people have to generate a novel response. We suggest that in the case of goals, scripts can be violated when people learn earlier than expected that they will attain a goal because goal scripts “tell” people to feel happy at the conclusion of a motivational episode (and not sooner). Indeed, the goal script people follow includes their own emotional reaction to attainment. When people interpret a motivational episode through the lens of a script, they compare how they expect events to occur to how events actually occur. Whether people experience intense positive emotion will depend on whether information received about the conclusion of a motivational episode actually coincides with the episode’s conclusion. Commonly, learning that a goal has been attained will lead to intense positive emotion. In contrast, learning that a goal will be attained may be considered to be “premature” information, and thus people may experience mellowed positive emotion in response. Though people in these situations may not actively suppress positive emotion, we suggest they would experience muted positive emotion because a goal script is disrupted.

Separately from surprise about timing of information on goal attainment (i.e., violation of scripts), other types of surprise can occur and can either intensify or suppress positive emotion during goal pursuit (Le Poire & Burgoon, 1996; Mellers, Schwartz, & Ritov, 1999; Orthony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Price & Geer, 1972; Schachter & Singer, 1962; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Thus, people may experience intense positive emotion because they are surprised about being able to attain the goal, especially if they thought about the goal as a long shot. In addition, people may be surprised when their progress is faster or slower than expected and experience the corresponding positive or negative emotion (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009; Higgins, 1987). Moreover, people may be surprised to learn about the cause of a positive outcome (e.g., that admission to college was partially determined by a good word from an alum).

Here we investigate a different element of surprise in goal pursuit, namely the timing of learning about goal attainment. We predict that when people learn unexpectedly early that a goal will be attained, the disruption in the goal script will cause people to experience mellowed positive emotion. This is because learning early that a goal will be attained is inconsistent with goal scripts, making it difficult for people to identify the moment when they should feel happy. We suggest that this script mechanism will tend to go against the favorable resolution of uncertainty that occurs when a goal is attained. Attaining a goal removes uncertainty and results in positive emotion, but attaining a goal in a script-inconsistent manner mutes this positive emotion to a degree.

Importantly, after receiving early information, people may sometimes also learn that they attained their goal in the way that they initially expected to learn this information. For example, after getting an admission email the college applicant in our opening example can also receive the admission letter in the mail. An interesting question arises as to whether this college applicant would experience intense happiness when the letter comes. More generally, would learning that a goal will be attained (which disrupts the goal script) also lead to muted positive emotion once the goal is actually attained? We predict it does. Thus, because positive emotion is fragile and short-lived (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000) and because goal attainment is highly expected if people learned about it in advance, completing the goal script after it has been disrupted would do little to reawaken happiness. We therefore predict that at no point – upon learning that the goal will be attained or that it was attained – will those for whom the goal script was disrupted experience the same level of happiness as those for whom the script was followed.

### Goal value as an experiential phenomenon

An important consequence of mellowed positive emotion when attaining a goal is that the goal may be devalued. The link between positive emotion and high goal value has been theorized to be bidirectional (Fishbach, 2009). On the one hand, positive evaluation of a goal leads to a more positive experience of goal pursuit. When people evaluate a goal positively, they tend to experience positive emotion while pursuing and attaining it (Fishbach, Shah, & Kruglanski, 2004). Moreover, people experience goal-related stimuli more positively while pursuing a goal (Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson & Bargh, 2004), and also experience stimuli unrelated to an active goal more negatively than they experience stimuli related to an active goal (Brendl, Markman, & Messner, 2003).

On the other hand, positive experience during goal pursuit causes more positive evaluations of the goal. The affect-as-information approach makes this general prediction in suggesting that people derive evaluative information from their feelings (Clore, Gasper, & Garvin, 2001; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Regulatory engagement theory proposes that under certain conditions high engagement and involvement while pursuing a goal leads to more positive evaluations of the goal (Higgins, 2006). Likewise, pursuing a goal in a manner that fits one’s regulatory

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