

The role of implicit motivation in hot and cold goal pursuit: Effects on goal progress, goal rumination, and emotional well-being

Oliver C. Schultheiss^{a,*}, Nicolette M. Jones^b, Alexstine Q. Davis^a, Casey Kley^a

^a Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

^b New York University, New York, USA

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Abstract

Two cross-sectional studies examined the role of implicit motivational needs in the association between personal goal pursuits and depressive symptoms and affect. Replicating and extending on findings reported by Brunstein et al. [Brunstein, J. C., Schultheiss, O. C., & Grässmann, R. (1998). Personal goals and emotional well-being: The moderating role of motive dispositions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(2), 494–508], both studies provided evidence that goal progress significantly accounted for variations in depressive symptoms and happiness only in individuals with high levels of implicit motivation, but not in individuals low in implicit motivation. Moreover, in the absence of a strong sense of goal commitment, high levels of implicit motivation were associated with high goal progress in both studies and low levels of goal rumination in Study 2. These findings are interpreted within a dual-systems framework of motivation that distinguishes an implicit, intuitive, and hedonically driven from an explicit, effortful-analytical, and non-hedonic mode of goal pursuit.

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1. Introduction

Research on personal goals, defined as the personally meaningful pursuits that people construe for themselves and try to attain in their everyday lives (Brunstein, 1993), indicates that persistent difficulties in goal striving are associated with impaired mood and depressive symptoms. Individuals who cling to goals that are no longer attainable in their current life situation are more likely to suffer from low mood and depressive symptoms than individuals who pursue attainable goals (e.g., Feather & Barber, 1983; Keller & Nesse, 2005; Lecci, Karoly, Briggs, & Kuhn, 1994; Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002). Moreover, longitudinal studies reveal that

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 734 647 9440.

E-mail address: oschult@umich.edu (O.C. Schultheiss).

difficulties and setbacks on the way towards realizing personal goals lead to subsequent decreases in emotional well-being, indicating that low goal progress is a precursor, not a consequence, of impaired mood (e.g., Brunstein, 1993, 1999; Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996).

Recent research suggests, however, that high rates of progress do not per se translate into enhanced, and low rates of progress not always into impaired, emotional well-being. Rather, success and failure in the pursuit of personal goals affects mood only to the extent that goals are relevant for the satisfaction of implicit motives. Implicit motives are non-conscious dispositions to experience specific types of incentives as rewarding. Research conducted over the past 50 years has focused on the needs for power, achievement, and affiliation–intimacy as three of the most fundamental human motives (McClelland, 1987). Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Grässmann (1998) assessed these motives with thematic content coding of picture stories in two longitudinal studies with German students. They also assessed students' personal goals with a goal inventory, and measured their emotional well-being with a mood adjective scale. Brunstein and colleagues found that for individuals who pursued goals that were supported by strong implicit motives, high rates of goal progress predicted elevated well-being as assessed by self-report mood adjective scales, whereas low rates of goal progress predicted decreased well-being.

These results can best be understood if one conceives of motive-supported goals as opportunity structures that allow people to experience emotional highs through consummation of affectively charged incentives. Thus, for a power-motivated person the goal of becoming president of a student organization provides many opportunities to have impact on others (the incentive of the power motive) en route to the goal by, for instance, persuading others and enlisting their support, being visible through making speeches and giving interviews, and so forth. Being successful at taking advantage of such opportunities not only promotes the realization of the long-term goal, but also provides the person with frequent experiences of having impact on others, experiences that due to the person's strong power motive are pleasurable and contribute to overall emotional well-being. Successful realization of goals ripe with incentives for a person's implicit motivational needs therefore provides an opportunity for *motivational gratification*.

However, a motive-supported goal can also set up a person for *motivational frustration*, if his or her efforts to promote the goal and take advantage of opportunities to do so are frequently thwarted. Consider the power-motivated person again who runs for office, but finds herself outmaneuvered by competitors, unable to make an impression on an audience, or faced with opposition when trying to convince others of her views. All of these experiences are adverse to the person's need for power and will elicit feelings of tension, frustration, and dejection. Thus, the pursuit of motive-supported goals provides opportunities to satisfy one's implicit needs, but can also set one up for impaired mood if taking advantage of such opportunities becomes difficult or impossible. Striving for motive-supported goals can therefore be considered an affectively "hot" mode of goal pursuit, because successes and failures en route to the goal impinge on the person's implicit motivational needs.

While both motivational gratification and motivational frustration represent outcomes in the pursuit of affectively hot personal goals, Brunstein et al. (1998) also found evidence for an affectively "cold" mode of goal pursuit, in which high or low progress in the pursuit of goals in the absence of strong implicit motives (e.g., a person low in achievement motivation successfully realizing an achievement goal) had *no* detectable effect on changes in individuals' emotional well-being. Success at realizing goals that were not supported by implicit motives did not lead to emotional highs, but neither did failure to achieve such goals lead to emotional lows. This finding could not be explained by variations in goal commitment or goal progress, because subjects were equally committed to motive-supported and non-supported goals and reported similar rates of progress towards both types of goals.

To summarize, past research shows that the pursuit of hot goals, that is, personal goals that are backed up by strong implicit motives, allows individuals to experience intense motivational gratification through successful goal enactment, but also represents a vulnerability for motivational frustration if they experience setbacks in their attempts to realize motive-supported goals. On the other hand, variations in the rate at which individuals can realize cold goals, that is, goals that are pursued in the absence of strong implicit motives, incur neither emotional costs nor benefits.

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