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Holding on (to the Goal) or Letting it Go and Move On?

A Tripartite Model of Goal Striving

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Abstract

Recent findings challenge the widely held motto of “never give up” in goal striving. There are situations where it is of strategic interest to abandon an important goal and allocate resources to an alternative goal. The ability to realize whether a goal is attainable or not (and therefore the ability to make the “right choice” between goal persistence and goal disengagement/reengagement) is influenced by at least two key motivational factors: motivation for goal striving and a self-regulatory technique called “mental contrasting with implementation intentions.” The interplay between these two factors is yet unexplored, but holds promise for several conceptual and practical advancements in understanding the pursuit of challenging life goals. To this end, we propose a tripartite model of goal striving that integrates goal motivation and goal regulation.

Keywords: goal motives, goal disengagement, goal reengagement, mental contrasting, implementation intentions

Andy Murray, the famed British tennis player, was faced with a big dilemma while recovering from a back injury in May 2013. Should he enter the French Open to pursue his dream of competing in four Grand Slam finals in a row or stay home, recuperate, and be ready for the Wimbledon two months later? He chose to withdraw his participation in the French Open, which was “a very tough decision” (Dickson, 2013).

Perseverance in the pursuit of an important goal has often been glorified in ancient and modern times. In contrast, “giving up” is frequently regarded an indication of weakness and lack of determination or grit (i.e., the tenacious pursuit of a goal despite setbacks; Duckworth & Carlson, 2013). Certainly, effort and commitment are prerequisites for goal attainment (Locke & Latham, 2015). However, there are situations where persistence is futile due, for example, to time constraints or rising task demands. To illustrate, many individuals give up on their weight loss maintenance efforts, because they are unwilling to adjust their goals when experiencing setbacks (Mckee, Ntoumanis, & Smith, 2013). Thus, individuals need to be strategic in how they invest or re-allocate their limited resources in pursuit of important goals in various domains (e.g., work, health, relationships).

A good deal of research has focused on attainable goals and how they are activated or should be framed to facilitate optimal performance (Fishbach, Koo, & Finkelstein, 2014). Comparatively, far less is known about persistence in the face of increasingly difficult goals or strategic goal disengagement. Carver and Scheier (2005) proposed that the negative consequences associated with unattainable goals (e.g., low self-esteem, distress, future avoidance of challenging goals) can be alleviated through effective *goal disengagement*. Such disengagement is crucial, because it prevents the accumulation of failure experiences and frees personal resources for future goal striving. Moreover, these authors highlighted the benefits of alternative goal engagement (*goal reengagement*). Goal reengagement can take

many forms and can occur within or across different life domains and goal hierarchies, such as pursuing a new subordinate goal that provides an alternative path to the same higher-level goal or scaling back the original goal. Goal reengagement can ease the distress associated with unattainable goals by opening up future opportunities for goal attainment (Wrosch, Scheier, & Miller, 2013).

In this article, we ask the question: “Can people become strategic in their goal pursuits by deciding early in their goal striving whether to persist on a difficult goal or give up and strive for a compatible goal”? In doing so, we argue for the importance of examining the motivational antecedents of adaptive and maladaptive regulation of goal striving, and we consider the role of two key mechanisms: the motives for goal pursuit and a metacognitive strategy called “mental contrasting with implementation intentions” (MCII; Oettingen, 2012). Additionally, we propose a tripartite model of goal striving that integrates motives for goal striving and self-regulatory responses to difficulties linked with goal striving (Figure 1). We acknowledge in the model (path H) that decisions about goal persistence, disengagement, or reengagement can also depend on dispositional factors (e.g., perfectionism—Eddington, 2014; pessimism—Dickson, Moberly, O’Dea, Field, 2016), but we focus on the contributing role of *motivational factors*, which are fairly amenable to change.

Motivation for Goal Striving

Our review draws from the self-concordance model (Sheldon, 2014), which is concerned with the “why” of goal striving. Drawing from Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), Sheldon (2014) advocated the benefits of *autonomous motives* (e.g., enjoyment, personal benefit) as opposed to *controlled motives* (e.g., guilt, pressure) for goal striving. Research across a variety of life strivings, ages, and cultures has shown autonomous motivation to entail greater volitional strength and to result in greater goal importance,

efficacy, effort, and attainment, compared to controlled motivation (Elliot et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011).

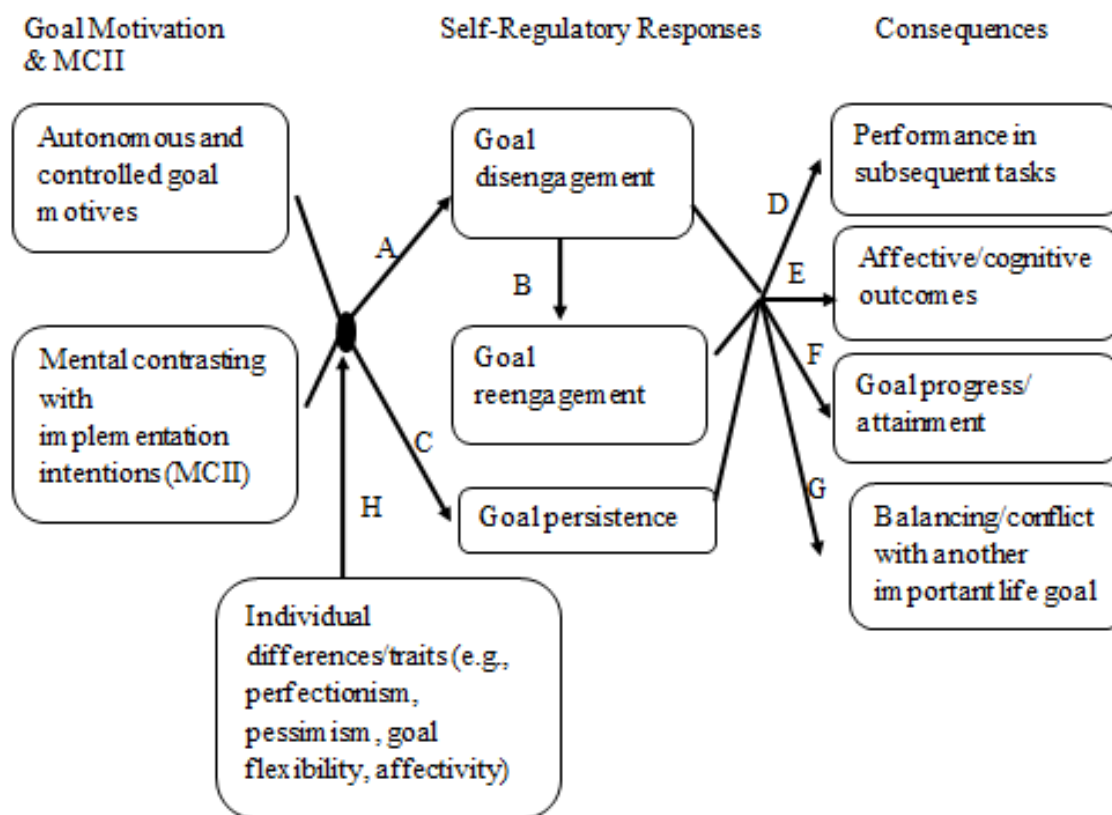


Figure 1. The tripartite model of goal striving.

Note: Goal disengagement does not always lead to goal reengagement, but in this article we are mainly interested in instances where such an option is viable. To reduce the number of arrows, we depict paths in groups; for example, path E displays the path from each of the self-regulatory responses on affective/cognitive outcomes. Path F is an exception, given that it is only relevant for goal reengagement and persistence. The black dot indicates interaction effects. Individual differences/traits are predicted to moderate such effects.

Laboratory experiments have addressed the role of goal motivation in predicting persistence with an increasingly difficult, but attainable, goal (Ntoumanis, Healy, Sedikides, et al., 2014), and with an unattainable goal (Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al., 2014). Participants with autonomous (vs. controlled) goal motives, assessed via self-reports and manipulated via priming techniques, exhibited more adaptive behaviors (i.e., higher

persistence) and cognitions (e.g., approach coping focus) when striving for an increasingly *difficult, but attainable, goal*. This is not surprising given that autonomous goals reflect one's core values, interests, and capabilities, and therefore one is more likely to self-select and pursue such goals. According to SDT, when individuals function autonomously, they are sensitive to feedback about progress and subsequently likely to adjust their actions. However, in our research we have found that participants with autonomous motives found it hard to disengage mentally from *an unattainable goal*, even if they disengaged behaviorally from trying to attain that goal. Yet, if they perceived the goal as unattainable earlier in goal pursuit, they were more likely to reengage with an alternative goal. Taken together, when one strives for unattainable goals, realizing earlier the unattainability of the goal will facilitate adaptive self-regulation, particularly if the motivation for goal striving is autonomous.

Facilitating Adaptive Goal Striving

How is it possible to enable an earlier realization of goal unattainability, and thus facilitate goal disengagement, goal reengagement, and adaptive affective/cognitive reactions? A key mechanism, we propose, is mental contrasting (MC; Oettingen, 2012) in conjunction with implementation intentions (“if-then” plans; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998)—what Oettingen (2012) labelled MCII. This trainable metacognitive strategy involves individuals considering and contrasting future and current goal status. Consequently, expectations of attaining the desired goal become activated, and appropriate “if-then” plans can be formulated. When such expectations are high, people will commit to their goal pursuit. However, when expectations of success are low, people will disengage and may pursue alternative goals. Thus, MCII helps people discriminate between feasible and unfeasible goals. We note that MCII improves accuracy of goal attainment expectations, but does not change the level of such expectations. In a similar vein, Brandstätter and Herrmann (2016) articulated the adaptive potential of an *action crisis* (the decisional conflict between goal

persistence and disengagement) prior to goal disengagement by weighing up the pursued course of action against alternative, and potentially more desirable, goals.

MCII has been shown to strengthen goal pursuit by increasing commitment to attainable goals (Oettingen, 2012). However, researchers have yet to test the role of MCII in facilitating goal disengagement, followed by alternative goal engagement. Further, relevant empirical work on MCII has not considered the pivotal role of different goal motives in decisions to persist, disengage, and/or reengage (Ntoumanis, Healy, Sedikides, et al., 2014; Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al., 2014). In our tripartite model of goal striving (Figure 1), we extend past work by articulating how interactions between MCII and goal motives facilitate adaptive responses to goal striving challenges (i.e., persistence with difficult but attainable goals, disengagement with or without reengagement in the face of unattainable goals), and the consequences of such decisions (i.e., performance, affective/cognitive outcomes, goal progress/attainment, balancing/conflict with another important life goal).

Integrative Model of Goal Motivation and Goal Regulation of Goal Strivings

We present the model in the form of key questions and answers. For some of the questions, there is empirical evidence available; for others, we suggest hypotheses awaiting empirical verification.

Does MCII Help Individuals (Particularly Those with Controlled Goal Motivation) to Persist with an Increasingly Difficult but Attainable Goal?

Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, and Gagnon's (2008) review indicates that commitment to goal pursuit (and goal attainment) is stronger when based on personal value of the goal (i.e., autonomous motives). However, when goal motivation is based on controlled motives (e.g., avoiding guilt, gaining approval), commitment and goal attainment are poor. Although it is desirable for individuals not to be engaged in goal pursuit for controlled reasons, often this is not the case. For example, individuals may feel obliged to pursue goals

that are of low or no inherent interest/enjoyment (e.g., eat vegetables, do household chores). In such cases where goal motivation is controlled, MCII might be beneficial in strengthening commitment to goal pursuit. To this end, future research could examine the interactions of MCII with goal motivation in predicting persistence with and attainment of challenging, but attainable, goals (Paths C, E, and F in Figure 1). We hypothesize that MCII will interact with goal motivation, such that MCII (vs. not MCII) will be more beneficial for controlled than autonomous goal motivation. This hypothesis aligns with Gollwitzer and Schaal's (1998) finding that implementation intentions are beneficial for those who find tasks unattractive. Future research could examine whether mental contrasting for attainable goals could change motivation, rendering it more autonomous. Reflective processes can enhance autonomy (Blöser, Schöpf, & Willaschek, 2010); mental contrasting is such a reflective process that can precipitate conscious choice, an element of autonomous functioning.

Does MCII Help Individuals (Particularly Those with Autonomous Goal Motivation) to Disengage Earlier from an Unattainable Goal and Reengage in a New Goal?

Using MCII to facilitate timely goal disengagement can be effective. Evidence demonstrates that this self-regulatory technique enables the formation of more accurate assessments of goal difficulty and goal attainment expectancies (Oettingen, 2012). Hence, MCII has the potential to facilitate goal disengagement and alternative goal engagement, in particular when motivation for goal pursuit is autonomous (paths A and B). We hypothesize that individuals who use MCII (vs. control) will be less likely to persist and more likely to disengage from the pursuit of an unattainable goal and to reengage in a new compatible goal. This is because these individuals will benefit from MCII and realize earlier the unattainability of the pursued goal. Reengagement will be more likely among individuals with autonomous (vs. controlled) motivation for goal striving; as Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al. (2014) demonstrated, earlier realization of goal unattainability promotes goal reengagement only for

those with autonomous motivation. We also hypothesize that individuals in the MCII condition will report more positive affect (path E), because, as a result of their timely disengagement/reengagement, they will experience less rumination from goal failure. Again, this effect will be stronger among those with autonomous goal motivation. Future research could address if the strength of the expected associations varies within specific dimensions of autonomous (intrinsic vs. identified) and controlled (introjected vs. external) motivation.

Does MCII Help Individuals Who Disengage Early to Perform Better in Subsequent Tasks?

The literature pertaining to the influence of unattainable goals on performance in subsequent cognitive and physical tasks is rather scarce (Path D). Masicampo and Baumeister (2011) showed that preventing individuals from fulfilling their goals interfered cognitively with engagement in subsequent tasks that required executive functions (e.g., impulse control). Hence, failing to achieve a goal may have long-term consequences. In conditions where participants were allowed the time to fulfil their goals, the negative effects on executive function were annulled. However, an unfulfilled goal is not the same as an unattainable goal. Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al. (2014) reported that the cognitive difficulty of disengaging from unattainable goals engenders distress and futile behavioral persistence, but they did not examine after-task consequences in terms of performance functioning, and whether such consequences are contingent on the motivation for goal pursuit and the use of MCII. We hypothesize that individuals trained to use MCII will perform better in these tasks, because, as a result of their timely disengagement/reengagement, will experience reduced rumination (i.e., a hypothesized mediator; Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al., 2014) from goal failure. As explained earlier, this beneficial effect of MCII use will be greater among those with autonomous goal motivation.

Do MCII and Goal Motives Affect Multiple Goal Pursuit Balancing/Conflict?

Being flexible (vs. rigid) with the pursuit of one goal can influence how well a person manages competing goals (Karoly et al., 2005). However, it is unknown whether different goal-adjustment responses predict distinctly the concurrent pursuit and balancing/conflict of another important and competing life goal (path G). We hypothesize that persons who use MCII and adopt goals for autonomous (vs. controlled) reasons will respond well to daily goal-related challenges and experience less conflict with competing goals. In partial support of this hypothesis, Belanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, and Kruglanski (2013) reported that individuals with a harmonious passion for an activity (i.e., reflecting self-endorsed reasons for activity engagement) were less likely to experience goal conflict and were more likely to engage in multiple goals simultaneously, compared to those with an obsessive passion (i.e., reflecting controlled reasons for activity engagement).

Based on Ntoumanis, Healy, Sedikides, et al. (2014), and on Ntoumanis, Healy, Smith, et al. (2014), we hypothesize that the beneficial effects of MCII will be mediated by the earlier realization of goal unattainability (for persons who disengage from an unattainable goal and then reengage) or by greater goal attainment expectancies and goal self-efficacy (for persons who persist with an attainable goal). Such adaptive resources can reduce interference among competing (e.g., career and family) goals by improving resource management, and can even facilitate multiple goal attainment (Riediger & Freund, 2004).

Conclusions

We addressed a substantive issue, namely, how individuals can become more strategic in investing their limited resources toward the pursuit of important and difficult goals. Our proposed tripartite model of goal striving (persistence, disengagement, reengagement) identified two key mechanisms for strategic goal setting: motivation for goal striving and MCII. These mechanisms have been examined in isolation, but their interactive effects remain untested. Addressing such effects can culminate in conceptual advances and practical

benefits in reference to strategic goal pursuit. Autonomous goal motivation may be practically facilitated by creating social environments in which individuals experience satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Training individuals in MCII is an effective and time-efficient self-regulatory intervention (Oettingen, 2012). We generated several theory-guided questions, thus mapping out an empirical agenda. Pursuit of this agenda can have practical implications for the wider public in contexts that call for engagement in the pursuit of difficult or unattainable goals (e.g., family, work, weight management).

We concur with Carver and Scheier (2005), who remarked that “for successful negotiation of the challenges life provides, we believe yet another kind of competence is also important: the ability to know when to continue the effort to reach a goal, and when to disengage and let it go” (p. 543). Andy Murray is an apt example of the benefits of “letting go” of one’s cherished goals. His decision to withdraw from the 2013 French Open was a tough one but also a good one; it gave him the time to recuperate and reengage successfully with another goal, that is, winning his first Wimbledon title and ending Britain’s 77-year wait for a men’s champion.

Notes Page

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- Ntoumanis, N., Healy, L. C., Smith, A. L., Sedikides, C., & Duda, J. L. (2014). Self-regulatory responses to unattainable goals: The role of goal motives. *Self and Identity, 13*, 594-612. The first empirical investigation of how goal motivation impacts disengagement and reengagement responses to goal unattainability.
- Oettingen, G. (2012). Future thought and behaviour change. *European Review of Social Psychology, 26*, 1-63. An overview of the construct of MCII (mental contrasting with implementation intentions) and its applications.
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