
PERSONAL GOALS: STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES IN ADULT DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Humans are able to project the future on very complex dimensions, aiming at accomplishing various desires, wishes or projects. The present article conducts a critical analysis of personal goals at adult age, through an integrative review of the literature regarding structures and processes relevant for these types of goals. Starting with a brief presentation of goal definitions, we then discuss the elaboration of personal goals at adult age, through differential integration of normative requirements and individual characteristics. We next present theoretical tenets of developmental personal goal processes, through integration of gains and losses. In the last segment of the article, we analyze the transformation of action independent personal goals (wishes, desires and fantasies about the future) into operational goals, with adequate action commitment.

KEYWORDS: *personal goals, developmental tasks, adult development, action commitment.*

Goals are pervasive constructs in human existence. We project our actions in the future, aim at reaching outcomes, set standards, and create desired end states. We seem to organize our lives around the plans we make for ourselves, the goals we set, and the outcomes we expect. Individuals tend to project their development in terms of goals, intentions, or purposes.

Contemporary psychological discourse defines goals as „internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes” (Austin & Vancouver, 1996, p. 338). Elliott and McGregor (2001) view goals as being not only oriented toward accomplishment of desired outcomes (approach goals), but also toward escaping dreaded outcomes (avoidance goals). Shah and Kruglansky (2003) conceptualize goals as knowledge structures,

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“that is, as cognitive representations characterized by particular contents and particular functions” (p. 1109). Goals are linked to the activation of specific cognitions and actions and they „bias behavior adaptively” (Gray and Braver, 2002, p. 295) when they dynamically adjust to situational conditions which shape levels of goal priority.

Definitions of goals denote a future finality or outcome that is mentally construed in the present, aimed at increasing personal and contextual organization of resources, toward the achievement of that outcome. There are multiple theoretical and methodological approaches of goal contents, structures and processes, on different domains (eg., learning, health, work), and levels of analysis (for reviews on goal processes and structures see Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Emmons & Kaiser, 1996; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Locke & Latham, 2000). These theoretical or applied tenets reflect a Babel tower approach of goals, with many overlapping different concepts, a large array of postulated processes and different taxonomies of goal contents. It is difficult to construct an integrative view of human goals, because there are multiple levels of analysis, from molecular mechanisms to molar regularities, each offering complex information, framed in multiple, often antagonistic theories (eg., control theory versus self-efficacy models).

From these complex approaches we view the following as *major statements regarding human goals*: (a) behavior is directed by the pursuit of goals; (b) goals are cognitive representations of outcomes (desired or feared); (c) goals influence and are influenced by evaluations, emotions and behaviors that are linked to goal structures, processes and contents; (d) goals are hierarchically organized in dynamic systems of superordinate and subordinate goals.

Goals imply the assumption of intentionality in adult development. At various levels of content and structure, they give direction to our actions and meaning to our “becoming”. Personal goals, seen as goals of high long-term relevance for a person, maintain strength over time and adversities and represent subjectively important means or end-states. They guide paths to development and organize lower-order, task specific goals. In this article we aim at critically analyzing the structural dimension of personal goals at adult age, through integration of developmental tasks and personal expectations about the temporal elaboration of goals (Freund & Ebner, 2005). We also look at structural and process elements through the lenses of gain and loss management, on the one hand and transformation of wishes and desires into action goals, on the other hand.

MULTIPLE FACETS OF PERSONAL GOALS

In this article, we define *personal goals as goals which have high relevance for an individual, for longer periods of time in his development*. In order to offer a glimpse into the complexity of personal goals, we first discuss major defining features of these goals, which we extracted from a critical analysis of

general goal literature and personal goal literature. Then we review some concepts that encompass the meaning of personally important goals.

Characteristics of personal goals

Most studies regarding personal goals focus on content and system dimensions (Freund & Baltes, 2002; Nurmi, 1992; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997), which are not enough in specifying their characteristics. The literature on goal processes and structures is usually partisan to certain theoretical models, or focuses on specific aspects of goal dynamics, like goal setting, goal framing and so on (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Cochran & Tesser, 1996; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski, Shah, Fishbach, Friedman, Chun, & Sleeth-Keppler, 2002; Perin, 1991; Pintrich, 2000). In order to postulate several personal goal characteristics which in our opinion have high significance for these types of goal, we derived them from different approaches on goals and present them in an integrated form, which can facilitate their understanding. We acknowledge that these are not the only defining features, but they are sufficient in creating a more operational image of personal goals.

Relevance refers to perceived importance or value of a goal, in the context of goal systems and represents a key factor in increasing goal *commitment* and *persistence* in goal achievement (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Goal relevance can be analyzed with focus on goal-setting or goal-striving. On the one hand, focus on *goal setting* involves goal contents which are indicators of potential goal achievement (e.g., Dweck, 1996; Freitas & Higgins, 2002). On the other hand, *goal striving* reflects goal processes that lead to the implementation of a goal. This is done by means of action oriented behaviors and cognitions the individual activates and carries out in order to accomplish that goal (Gollwitzer, 2003; 1996). An individual can evaluate a goal as being of high importance, when integrating it in his system of goals. For instance, an adult can regard the goal of “becoming a parent” as having high relevance. Still, when engaging in activities that transform goals into actions, therefore focusing on goal attainment, other goals, of lesser perceived importance, may have primacy. In this case, work related goals, which are evaluated as less important by the individual, but are more urgent to implement, can be pursued with higher priority. Therefore, *we believe that personal goals must be approached both from the angle of personal evaluation of importance (goal setting), but also from a process view of goal implementation (goal pursuit).*

Individuals set and pursue many personal goals at one time, which are *integrated* in goal systems. As mentioned above, some of them will be accomplished, others postponed or relinquished. Interactions among personal goals modulate their relevance and probabilities of attainment. A specific distinction arises from whether we focus on personal goal outcomes or end-states versus processes or means. End-states refer to envisioned finalities which have different levels of specificity and organize behavior. Means are more interchangeable and

contain procedural information and mechanisms relevant for achieving an outcome (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007). The interplay of outcomes and means is reflected in patterns of interactions among goals. According to goal models (Kruglansky et al., 2002; Pervin, 1991) the main patterns refer to: multidetermination (multiple goals can be integrated or in conflict with each other), equipotentiality (the same goal can lead to very different outcomes), equifinality (an outcome can be reached by means of different goals), multifinality (more goals can be reached through the same means). In a thorough assessment of personal goals, these patterns of interaction unveil inter-individual and intra-individual differences in goal dynamics. Any personal goal must be analyzed through the relations it has with other personal or more specific task goals (Little, 2007).

The *differential accessibility* of a personal goal is construed as its variability in activation across time and situations (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007). We further refine this definition and consider high accessibility of a personal goal should be construed in terms of both perceived high relevance and action pursuits for its achievement. A goal can be active, temporarily deactivated or permanently deactivated or relinquished. The level of activation of a personal goal can vary as a function of numerous factors, of which we mention but a few. A personal goal remains active and guides action behaviors when there is increased availability of *means* (internal and external) for its attainment (Kruglansky et al., 2002). *Integration or conflict with other goals*, whether they are personal or imposed by external factors, also modulates its activation. For a university student, a personal goal of “building a family” can be in conflict with the normative request of “graduating from university in three years”. This conflict may lead to a temporary or final deactivation of the family goal, in favor of the graduating goal. *Developmental pressure* in focusing on specific goal domains or contents is another factor in reducing or enhancing the activation of a personal goal. This aspect will be more thoroughly analyzed in the next section of the article.

The *content of personal goals* is domain specific, possible life domains at adult age being: work, family, leisure, intimacy. Each life domain can be analyzed through specific structural coordinates that usually change in line with developmental requirements. For instance, during young adulthood, the normative focus in the work domain is on in-depth exploration of career choices, while in middle adulthood it tends to shift toward stabilization in a chosen work field (Super, 1990). We must acknowledge that individual differences in defining the contents of personal goals offer high variability in approaching normative requests (Arnett, 2000; Little, 2007).

The *specificity* of personal goals reflects individual variations in projecting the future on qualitative and abstract dimensions, as compared to representing it through quantitative, task-related coordinates. For instance, “buying a 2008 Audi A6” can be a high relevance goal for one individual while “reaching independence from my family” has the same value for another. As Austin and Vancouver (1996) pointed out, there are numerous criteria to mapping goal specificity. Research on personal goals investigates them either through self-reports elicited by the

relevance question (what is important or relevant for you), or through selection of a personal goal from a predefined list (Little, 2007; Nurmi, 1992; Pesseau, Sniehotta, Francis, & Little 2008). In this article, we refer to specificity in terms of abstract versus task concrete personal goals.

Conceptual construction of personal goals

There are multiple taxonomies and theories that try to describe or explain what the “personal” element means. In order to offer some coherence to these conceptual approaches, we propose a two level analysis, in terms of their specificity and level of relevance for present actions.

On a first level of analysis, we have concepts that try to encompass patterns of goals that are relevant in the present and focused on self-regulatory, task and domain-specific actions. Klinger (1996) uses the term *current concerns* to define goals of high priority for individuals, at one point in time. Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) refer to *life themes* as problems which a person wants to solve “above everything else”. Emmons (1986, apud Boldero & Francis, 2002) considers that *personal strivings* represent patterns of goals that reflect what an individual is typically trying to achieve. Emphasizing the importance dimension Little (2007) defines *personal projects* as “extended sets of personally salient action in context” (p. 25), which can refer to goals from different levels of a hierarchical goal system (Pesseau et al., 2008). *In analyzing these terms, we believe that they reflect the striving element of personal goals and capitalize on their relevance for action orientation in the present and in defined contexts. The level of specificity can be variable, but they tend to be bound more closely to groups of tasks and activate plans that are rather task related.*

On a second level of analysis, we have goal structures that focus on ideal representations of a future self, with impact on present specific goals, but with lower levels of specificity and more global relevance, being directly related to the development of more stable personality structures (Emmons & Kaiser, 1996). Markus and Nurius (1986) see *possible selves* as representations of desired and undesired qualities of the self, in terms of attainment or avoidance. In a similar manner, Gollwitzer and Kirchhof (1998) coin the term *self-defining goals* as “people’s ideal conceptions of themselves as possessing a readiness or potential to enact certain content-specific classes of behavior” (p. 394). Refining the meaning of ideal self development, Higgins (1996) introduces the concept of *self-guide*. A self-guide refers to an individual’s regulatory focus, between an ideal self-guide, with emphasis on hopes, wishes and aspirations and an ought self-guide, with emphasis on the required duties and responsibilities (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). *These concepts aim at mapping personal goals in the context of global self-development and incorporate a more general view of intentionality. They reflect the search for superordinate, higher-order structures that guide development and self-construction. We view these types of personal goals as having very high relevance, but they are more ubiquitous, and can be evaluated mainly through*

their impact on the self. Still, we must ascertain a structural evolution from the possible selves to the self-defining goals and the self-guide. While the first refers to global qualities of the self, the next two define a more “tangible”, cognitive and behavioral self.

There is a high degree of overlapping in the above mentioned concepts, with each term bringing additional information to facets of personal goals. From their analysis we extracted some relevant observations. First, in line with general definitions of goals, personal goals integrate projections of future outcomes (what one wants to achieve) or processes (how one wants to achieve an outcome), on dimensions of desirability (I want to) and requirement (I have to), approach and avoidance. Second, they maintain high individual relevance for longer periods of time, with different levels of activation. Third, they have variable specificity and are connected to general domains of individual functioning (work, intimacy, leisure, etc.). Fourth, they organize and give coherence to intermediate and lower-level goals, by referring to themes, concerns or projects that guide an individual's development.

PERSONAL GOALS AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Individuals are exposed to developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1980) or life tasks (Cantor & Blanton, 1996), seen as normative requirements and expectations which arise at different periods during the life-time (Nurmi, 1992). To a certain extent, the selection of personal goals is made from accessible developmental tasks. These tasks are defined by socio-cultural contexts, with contents nuanced by age, gender, role and other personal or group characteristics. The influences they exert on behavior are determined conjunctly by their *situational* (specific life and task domain, context characteristics) and *personal* (the knowledge and procedural systems the individual brings in approaching such tasks) dimensions (Baltes, 1998). Developmental tasks define global demands that adults encounter at a normative level (eg., starting a family, finding a job). The main analysis domains of developmental tasks relevant for adults can be roughly classified in (Oettingen, 1999): achievement (eg., preparing for an occupation), interpersonal (eg., finding a partner) and life management (eg., starting a family). A close look at the processes involved in translating this normative level into a personal system of goals is relevant for understanding how personal goals emerge.

Research on developmental tasks has been concerned with identifying *critical tasks* for the various stages of life-span development, aiming at their biological, psychological and cultural bases (Havighurst, 1980; Nurmi, 1992; Oettingen, 1999). These types of tasks have been mainly analyzed from a structural and content perspective (Dreher & Oerter, 1986). Institutional transitions, mainly from educational to occupational settings influence subjective availability of certain developmental tasks and their subsequent selection by the individual. Salmela-Aro and Nurmi (1997) reported the results of a three year longitudinal study conducted on 256 Finnish university students aged 18 to 32, aimed at

mapping transition to university and integration of developmental tasks. The pattern of responses showed that students' personal goals reflected age-graded developmental tasks, in education, occupation and family domains. Also, these goals maintained content consistency across time and transition periods and represented relevant indicators for increased longitudinal well-being and reduced depressive symptoms.

On a similar note, Cantor and Fleeson (1991) reported the results of a five year longitudinal study on students' developmental tasks during transition through college (N=93). They emphasize that from a selection of normative tasks students made in the first year, most of them maintained relevance until the fifth year (around 75%), with increased commitment and more detailed personal definition given to them. The patterns of life task commitment derived from this study sustained the hypothesis that most people tend to follow a so called "normative" trajectory in managing goals derived from developmental tasks. They choose and specify goals on more specific content dimensions, with a time-frame predetermined by the normative requests of the educational system. Still, there were subjects who presented either accelerated or very slow rates of personal goal operational conceptualization, thereby sustaining the idiosyncratic construal of such tasks.

One of the problems with defining developmental tasks resides in the variability of human development, on cultural, social or economic dimensions, bringing into question inter-individual, but also intra-individual differences. As an example, typical developmental tasks for young adults, as initially defined, are: choosing an occupation, selecting a partner, starting a family, having children, finding a congenial social group (Havighurst, 1980; Nurmi, 1992). In the last decade though, the concept of emerging adulthood came to question the contemporary dynamics of young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is conceptualized as a distinctive developmental period between 18 to 25 years of age, typical for people who are still in protective educational settings (college, university). They do not have the responsibilities of young adults and tend to postpone relevant decisions until education is concluded and focus on short and medium term goals. When discussing the dynamics of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2000) considers that emerging adults have other specific normative criteria for their development, as compared to the "classical" young adult. These normative tasks are different from those of young adulthood and refer to: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent. Roisman et al. (2004) point out that emerging adults can enter age-graded tasks just to experiment which role is more appropriate for their interests and capacities in certain contexts. Therefore, this type of peculiar approach reflects the personal goal of „finding one's place in life". So, specific contexts determine specific developmental demands, whose normative influence will be further refined by the individual in idiosyncratic personal goals.

It is important to ascertain that normative requirements exist and influence the manner in which adults define and integrate their personal goals. Structural

definitions of developmental tasks at adult age offer valuable starting points for an in-depth analysis of personal goals. From this perspective, a more interesting concern seems to stand in charting how adults choose among whichever pending developmental tasks and commit themselves to achieving certain behavioral standards (Oettingen, 1999). When planning for adult life, multiple factors shape the paths one chooses, with the individual being exposed to “selection pressure”, due to both limited internal or external resources and changes in context requirements (Baltes et al., 1999). Heckhausen and Tomasik (2002) consider that, as the proximity of normative deadlines draws closer, individuals may feel pressured to invest additional effort into approaching and achieving certain developmental tasks. We see this effort as incorporating a variety of processes that reflect individual differences in defining certain personal goals. A thousand people can have the same developmentally driven personal goal of ‘graduating from university’, which can be very relevant for all of them. Still, the specific patterns of construing and implementing it are marked by personal and contextual resources and limitations.

In this section we analyzed some concepts and mechanisms underlying the interaction of personal goal pursuit and developmental requirements. It is important to note that at various points in an individual’s adult life he is exposed to a number of possible developmental trajectories. We believe that these arise from his current personally relevant goals but also from the goal systems of people around him, from the requirements of various organizational structures he is integrated in, or from more global culturally-normed requirements. Adult life is marked by an increasing life experience, which mirrors personal resources and limitations, in terms of what was achieved or not, what one can actually do or not and so on. An interesting question arises: how are personal goals regulated in order to manage both resources and limitations and maintain personal coherence? We next focus on mechanisms involved in personal goal construction at adult age.

MANAGING AND INTEGRATING GAINS AND LOSSES: PERSONAL GOAL PURSUIT AT ADULT AGE

An important issue in approaching personal goals resides, in our opinion, in unveiling the processes individuals employ in order to manage that “personal” element. Developmental tasks do not offer enough information on how a certain goal maintains accessibility and relevance while facing differential resources and limitations. An increasing life experience gradually shapes the strategies one uses to approach normative or peculiar pursuits in terms of dealing with what one has or does not have, can or can’t do, should or should not do.

Gains and losses can be defined through multiple criteria. We present only the criteria used in this article. First, from a developmental approach, they are seen according to life-span changes, determined by age-associated decline in internal resources (Freund & Baltes, 2002) and accessibility of external resources (eg.,

family structures, occupational opportunities). Gains reflect resources, while losses cover limitations. Second, from a goal outcome point of view, management of gains versus losses represent marks for success versus failure in approaching personal goals. Most individuals capitalize on gains when they evaluate the attainment of a personal goal as being successful, whereas losses encompass failures of reaching certain predefined standards of action in goal pursuit.

We next present some mechanisms and processes involved in the management of resources and limitations in development during adulthood, tapping into how individuals select and frame personal pursuits.

Developmental approaches to goal management investigate how individuals process and integrate information from different sources (normative requirements, contextual demands, personal perceptions) in order to maintain adaptive levels of self-regulation. These processes are either gain or loss focused.

The model of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) views goal management as integrated regulation of the following mechanisms: elective goal selection, loss-based goal selection, optimization of goal-relevant means, and compensation (Freund & Baltes, 1998). These processes are defined on person and contextual specific coordinates and are analyzed in specific domains of psychological functioning, like autonomy, professional expertise or control (Baltes et al., 1999). Selection processes focus on directionality, optimization on growth and compensation on regulation of loss.

In our opinion, selection processes are of great importance for understanding how individuals developmentally frame their personal goals. Elective selection orients the subject toward new demands or tasks, while loss-based selection is guided by the anticipation of actual or anticipated losses. These antagonistic strategies frame from the very beginning the manner in which one approaches a goal. At different ages individuals are supposed to approach goals differentially (Freund & Baltes, 2002; Freund & Ebner, 2005; Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). These age-related peculiarities point out specific, developmentally regulated patterns of defining what “personal” means. Results of extensive research sustain this perspective. For instance, using self-report measures of SOC mechanisms and developmental outcomes, Freund and Baltes (2002) showed that elective selection presents a linear increase from early to middle and old adulthood, while loss-based selection is used most frequently by middle aged adults. Younger adults tend to be oriented and persistent when focused on maximum performance attainment goals, whereas older adults prefer personal goals framed in terms of compensation and maintenance (Freund & Ebner, 2005), due to age-associated decline of internal resources. Loss-avoidance is mostly linked to reduced well-being in younger adults.

An important refinement of developmental regularities in personal goal pursuit is outlined by these studies. The types of mechanisms individuals use in order to specify relevance and maintain high levels of activation for those relevant goals are predefined by age-related peculiarities and limitations. As people usually engage in several personal goals at the same time, Riediger et al. (2005)

investigated individuals' goal facilitation and interference in multiple goal pursuit through a multi-method field experiment. The results of their study showed that younger adults engage less intensively in achieving their self-selected goals than older adults, this being explained by the authors as a consequence of variability in mutual inter-goal facilitation. Younger adults report goals in life domains which they perceive as unimportant for life satisfaction, this being a source of conflict among goals, impeding selection of adequate resources and means. Older adults, on the other hand, are more selective in narrowing down pursuit of high personal relevance (Riediger et al., 2005).

As the adult ages, he seems to be more focused on losses, but also more attentive at approaching goals that really matter to him. Sometimes this is done by attaching increased relevance to those personal goals that he can control. Results of an eight years longitudinal study on adults age 30 to 59 revealed that relevance of those developmental goals on which perceived control decreased over time, was gradually reduced (eg., personal independence, social recognition, and intellectual efficacy). Therefore, a stable level of global perceived control on all personal goals was maintained (Brandtstaedter & Rothermund, 2002; Brandtstaedter & Rothermund, 1994). Personal goal relinquishment and downgrading seem to be important accommodative mechanisms in coping with developmental losses.

This developmental perspective of humans who define and pursue goals by gradually integrating the loss element in their personal goal system is sustained by the perspective of King and Hicks (2007) on the meaning of maturity. They analyze adult maturity from the angle of "lost possible selves" and view goal change and goal failure as developmental opportunities, in that they foster access to new conceptualizations of personal goals. The authors define two facets of maturity: happiness (subjective well-being) and complexity (ego development). In this framework, high complexity is achieved when the individual acknowledges the losses and elaborates upon them, but reduces the relevance of unaccomplished goals and commits to relevant current goals. These findings rely on studies conducted with adults who experienced life-changing losses, like having a child with Down syndrome or suddenly divorcing after a very long marriage. Due to complex limitations, unachieved personal goals reinstate a coherent goal system and high levels of well-being when the adult first elaborates on the "lost" goals and only afterwards disengages from them.

We believe that these approaches reduce to some extent the intentionality dimension and portrait an individual who tries to integrate and adapt as much as possible to the things that happen to him/her. As one moves through complex life experiences, which can be uncontrollable and unpredictable, personal goals are reframed in order to assimilate these experiences. Nevertheless, the pursuit of personal goals is driven not only by processes which aim at reducing discrepancies, but also by processes that create discrepancies. Bandura and Locke (2003) consider that "People are aspiring and proactive organisms, not just reactive ones. [...] They are motivated and guided by foresight of goals, not just by hindsight of shortfalls." (Bandura & Locke, 2003, p. 91). Research in the SOC framework sustains this

assumption. During adult development individuals reframe personal goals in order to make them viable in guiding action pursuits, even if they concentrate on losses, not only on gains. So, there remains a focus on becoming, not only on controlling and adjusting, with personal goals as positive anticipations of likely outcomes and self-motivating incentives.

FROM FANTASY AND DESIRE TO ACTION: THE INTRICATE MECHANISMS OF HOW PERSONAL GOALS BECOME REALITY

Translating personal goals into specific action goals represents, from a process perspective, an increased level of goal accessibility and detailed description on more specific task and context characteristics. In every day discourse people can have high relevance personal goals (achieving independence from family, choosing a rewarding occupation), but in order to actually achieve such future projections, they have to approach them one day at a time. Pathology often arises from individuals' inability to translate personal goals into reality, by means of negotiating on their desirability and feasibility dimensions (Oettingen, Bulgarella, Henderson, & Gollwitzer, 2004). Whether they are guided by developmental tasks or by distinctive trajectories, the translation of personal goals in an individual's development into action goals (Gollwitzer, 2003; 1996) represents an important issue in investigating the commitment one makes to a relevant pursuit.

Goal striving processes related to personal goals are of utmost importance here, as before a goal guides an individual's behavior, it is first selected from his/her wishes, desires and fantasies. These are projections about the future toward which the individual has not made an action commitment and has not proceeded to actually implement in reality. For example, in line with developmental tasks, an adult man may desire or wish to start a family, which can be a recurring and relevant cognitive representation, but might never act toward achieving it. He activates the representation whenever he thinks about the best possible future, but his actions are guided only by goals that are, for instance, work related. So, certain personal goals can remain desires or wishes for indefinite time, and the "road" from cognitive representation to reality implementation involves a series of goal pursuit processes and action commitments.

Action Phases to Goal Accomplishment

In trying to identify how people choose from an array of personal desires and attempt to translate their wishes into reality, Gollwitzer (2003; 1996) proposes the model of action phases. This model suggests that successful goal pursuit involves solving four consecutive tasks: *deliberating* wishes to make a goal decision (predecisional phase), planning the *implementation* of the chosen goal (preactional phase), *acting* toward goal attainment (actional phase), and *evaluating* achieved outcomes (postactional phase) (Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001;

Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990). A wish evaluated as high in desirability and feasibility (*predecisional* phase) does not necessarily turn into an action goal, as a subsequent decision to act upon a given wish is necessary. This step, however, is just a prerequisite for making progress toward wish fulfillment, because once a decision has been made, the next task is engagement in the initiation and successful execution of goal-directed actions.

When the necessary goal-directed actions are well practiced or routine, these processes can be implemented with limited processing resources activated. Unfortunately, things become far more difficult when individuals are undecided about where or how to act. The model defines this period prior to the initiation of goal-directed action as the *preactional phase*. In this phase, in order to further advance from wishes to actions, one must reflect and decide on *when, where, how* and *how long* to act, thus creating plans for action.

With the initiation of goal-directed behaviors, individuals enter the *actional phase*, by actively engaging in goal-directed behaviors and conclude with the *postactional* phase, of evaluating goal achievement and guiding toward other wishes to be pursued.

In the pursuit of personal goals, we view the predecisional phase as involving very complex processes. The feasibility and desirability of a desire can be evaluated through the lenses of developmental tasks, group influences, other active personal goals or goals that the person has previously achieved or relinquished. Therefore, future lines of research on personal goals should focus on how people choose and evaluate from a large array of wishes and desires those that will become relevant for them, in order to then move on to action commitment. The factors which influence this choice are also quite interesting to investigate, in order to better understand how individuals process developmental tasks and integrate them in their preexisting personal goal systems.

As the time-frame of planning a personal goal's implementation can be variable and usually refers to longer periods of time, we consider that the preactional phase can involve a segmentation of a personal goal into *subgoals* and choice of available *means* for these goals' achievement. The actional phase in personal goal pursuit can perhaps be better monitored through the analysis of action subgoals the individual follows. Here we think that an interesting aspect refers to the manner in which these subgoals and the adjacent means to achieving them serve one personal goal or become gradually *integrated* or *in conflict* with other goals. It would be very interesting, though somewhat difficult from a methodological perspective, to look closer at how goal relevant actions influence a person's goal systems in terms of integration or conflict among active goals. Management of means for goal attainment is very important in the action phase. As the individual usually pursues multiple goals simultaneously, an intense involvement in one goal can reduce resource availability for another or sometimes the same resources can be used to attain more goals (for a more detailed analysis of these aspects see Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007).

Deliberating on versus implementing a personal goal

In this context, the concept of *mind-set* (Gollwitzer, Fujita, & Oettingen, 2004; Gollwitzer, 2003; Gollwitzer, 1996) is defined as a general cognitive orientation which emerges when a person addresses the tasks associated with various action phases and facilitates their completion. Studies conducted by Gollwitzer et al. (Gollwitzer & Taylor, 1995; Gollwitzer et al., 1990) focus on the difference between a *deliberative mind-set* (that develops when people elaborate and analyze a personal wish) and an *implemental mind-set* (when people plan the execution of a personal goal). The deliberative mind-set is characterized by open-mindedness, tuning toward impartial and accurate analysis of feasibility and desirability related issues. The implemental mind-set is defined by limited processing of task-relevant information, cognitive tuning on implementation related issues and partial, self-serving positive illusion processing of feasibility and desirability related issues.

Individuals seem to be more prone to activate personal higher order goals in a deliberative mind-set, encouraging extensive processing of more general orientations towards certain life domains, though they is not directly activated by current tasks. Gollwitzer and Kinney (1989) immersed subjects in a deliberative versus implemental mindset over personal unresolved goals (eg., moving out from home). On the one hand, subjects in a deliberative condition were asked to name an unresolved goal and elaborate on its potential short-term and long-term positive and negative consequences. This group tended to process goal information more extensively and to evaluate control over goal attainment very accurately. On the other hand, subjects in the implemental condition were asked to identify a personal goal to be completed in the next three months and list behavioral steps for its completion and then make specific action plans for their attainment. This group showed a strong self-serving bias or positive illusions (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995) regarding control over goal completion and goal relevant information.

Therefore, a deliberative mind-set seems to facilitate extensive and accurate processing of goal relevant dimensions, whereas the implemental one aids, in an imperfect, yet effective manner, the transformation of desires and wishes into reality and persistence in goal related actions. As individuals hold multiple relevant personal goals at the same time, deliberating upon all of them would be a resource consuming process. Still, in situations of conflict among personal goals, we think that an increased focus on deliberating would offer greater chances of progress through goal action phases and subsequent effective implementation.

Turning free-fantasies into binding goals

Oettingen et al. (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001; Oettingen, 1999) analyze the processes involved in how individuals transform expectations and fantasies about the future into goals. Two types of

orientations toward personal goals are defined: expectations and free positive fantasies, based on an individual's evaluation of the probability of occurrence for a specific future outcome. Expectations are guided by this probability, whereas free fantasies refer to conceptualizations of future actions independent of their likelihood to actually happen. In our view, Bandura's feed-forward orientation is reinterpreted in this fantasy realization theory, because individuals are also conceptualized as future focused and resistant to a negative "impeding reality" (Oettingen, Bulgarella, Henderson, & Gollwitzer, 2004). A refinement of the positive future focus is added though, as its mental construction is seen as adaptive only in certain cases.

A dichotomy between a positive fantasy future and a negative impending reality is proposed. These two dimensions of individual projection are approached through three possible paths to transforming free fantasies into goals. The first path refers to contrasting positive fantasies about the future with negative aspects of impending reality. The second path focuses only on reality input and disregards positive fantasies about the future. The third path is based on indulging in positive fantasies and disregarding reality cues. The first path involves action expectancies that bridge fantasy and reality and is considered to be effective in facilitating goal implementation. The other two paths focus exclusively on the negative present reality or the positive fantasy future dimensions and are supposed to rather impede action orientation, by blocking the individual in a one-dimensional representation. Refinements of this model sustain, though, that immersing in positive fantasy, in terms of day-dreaming, facilitates the exploration of "one's possibilities to grow and one's opportunities to act" (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Brinkmann et al. (1998, apud Oettingen, 1999) showed that social workers involved in a vocational program, who were asked to elaborate on the negative and positive aspects of entering their occupation (mental contrasting) subsequently displayed significantly more constructive interactions with colleagues and clients than subjects who elaborated just on the positive. Similar results regarding improved involvement in goal relevant actions emerged from studies on other developmental tasks, like finding a partner, achieving economic independence, constructing a family or building a successful career (for reviews see Oettingen et al., 2004; Oettingen, 1999). Contrasting positive developmental fantasies with operational negative counterparts of reality appears to aid the strengthening of personal goals with a strong action orientation. Important factors in this equation seem to be individuals' expectations of success. Subjects in the mental contrast group showed increased readiness to act toward fulfilling a self-chosen interpersonal goal only when they perceived a high probability of success (Oettingen, 1999). When they had low success expectations, their readiness to act was much lower, compared to the positive fantasy and impeding reality groups, who showed medium readiness to act, disregarding success evaluations. So, mental contrasting is good mainly when it is self-serving and in line with positive action and success evaluations.

In this section we approached action related mechanisms through which individuals transform a future projection into binding goals and gradually commit to and implement these goals. The action orientation of personal goals represents one of the most relevant dimensions when conducting research on this topic or trying to elaborate applied interventions that aim at developing or guiding these types of goals in various life domains (work, intimacy, leisure).

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Personal goals offer operational standpoints for charting the mélange of social, age graded requirements and idiosyncratic pursuits, in the construction of a unique adult individual. Their importance for better understanding intentionality and the paths to individual development is beyond question.

In this article we first approached personal goals through a structural perspective. We defined and reflected upon some of their relevant features. We then analyzed the impact of developmental tasks on their elaboration. We reviewed theoretical tenets and results of studies that map the peculiarities of personal goals' construction between societal expectations and individual interpretations of possible developmental paths. Next, a developmental process analysis of integrating gains and losses into personal goal systems was conducted. The activation and persistence of personal goals, as complex knowledge structures, is shaped by the manner in which individuals manage information and processes pertaining to resources and limitations (external and internal). In the last segment we approached processes which assist the translation of action-free intentional goal structures (wishes, desires and free-fantasies) into binding goals, analyzing various paths to how personal goals are linked to action commitment and implementation.

Beyond the specific contents of personal goals, we believe that there are several general categories of goal operations, which reflect a global dynamics of goals, namely: goal *generation*, goal *activation*, goal *deactivation* and goal *interactions*. These are important fundamentals for organizing goal theories and gradually unifying discourses regarding more specific goal processes. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, goals have been neglected as units of analysis for human functioning. Cognitive psychology is tributary to propositional logic and has mainly focused on propositions and to a certain extent on images as units of analysis for human information processing. A cognitive psychology centered on goals as units of analysis for individual functioning would offer a more ecological dimension of how cognitive, emotional and behavioral contents are organized and activated in order to construct intentionality. The "new look on motivation" offers relevant theoretical and methodological input in this direction (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah & Kruglanski, 2003).

A personal goal can be generated from a person's wishes, desires and fantasies, which can reflect the expectations of others, age-graded developmental tasks, emotional tendencies or previous goal achievements and failures. There is an

intricate pattern of factors influencing the construction of a personal goal and future research in this area should focus more closely on the interplay of these factors. This is quite relevant from an action commitment perspective, as it would help explain why some goals remain active goals and are always played down in the imaginary, leading to the construction of “parallel realities” in which the individual seeks refuge when real goal attainment is perceived as impossible or improbable.

We acknowledge that the present article offers only a glimpse into the complexity of personal goals and some aspects were not included in this theoretical analysis. Still, we critically mapped concepts relevant for better understanding both contents and processes relevant for their creation, emphasizing developmentally relevant dimensions.

From an applied perspective, the mapping of personal goals dynamics at adult age and during transition periods offers valuable input for needs analysis and adequate implementation of group and community level programs, aimed at improving the development of goal relevant contents, structures or processes. Also, better understanding personal goals of adult individuals would aid any type of optimization intervention in various life domains (eg., education, work, family) and regarding different life roles (eg., student, parent, employee, spouse, leisurite).

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