

**The Effect of Goal Focus on Contentment with the Goal Pursuit: The Moderating Roles  
of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

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## **Abstract**

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effects of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. Sixty participants were asked to pick a goal that they pursue or want to pursue. Then the participants were randomly assigned to either a process focus or an outcome focus condition. After 5 days, we measured the dependent variable contentment with goal pursuit. We also measured two moderators (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation). The results showed a marginally significant interaction effect of intrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. With participants low on intrinsic motivation showing higher contentment with the goal pursuit using a process-focused approach compared to an outcome-focused approach, whereas for participants high on intrinsic motivation there was no difference between the conditions. There was no significant interaction effect of extrinsic motivation. Contradicting to previous research, no main effect was found between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. Overall, these findings provided a reason for the possibility that process focus has beneficial effects by increasing meaningfulness and decreasing procrastination, rather than by increasing qualities of intrinsic motivation. Also, this study highlights the possibility that the type of goal (abstract or concrete) can play a moderating role in the effect of goal focus.

## **The Effect of Goal Focus on Contentment with the Goal Pursuit: The Moderating Roles of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

It is probable to say that people pursue goals every day. This can be personal or work-related, and every person has their way of pursuing their goals. Goals can be defined as cognitive representations of desired (or dreaded) states to be approached (or avoided) through certain means (Kruglanski, 1996). What, why and, how we pursue a goal can have different effects on the quality of our behavior and well-being (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000). Due to this, understanding goal pursuit has been of research interest. People who experience goal pursuit as more meaningful and less boring are more likely to pursue or attain their goal, as they experience less task-aversiveness and procrastination (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000; Krause & Freund, 2016). Thus, one could state that contentment with the goal pursuit is likely to be a key factor in predicting successful goal attainment.

One explored line of research on goal pursuit has centered on the concept called goal focus. This research distinguishes between two kinds of goal focus, namely process and outcome focus (Freund & Hennecke, 2012). Process focus means that one is focusing on the means or action during goal pursuit and can be considered a more concrete approach, while outcome focus means that one is focusing on the end state or consequences of pursuing the goal. Previous research suggests that process focus is the more effective way for successful goal pursuit (Freund & Hennecke, 2012, 2015; Pham & Taylor, 1999).

For the scope of this study, we will be focusing on the influence goal focus on the contentment with the goal pursuit. Which goal focus is more likely to result in contentment might depend on the reason why someone is pursuing their goal: are they pursuing it because they naturally want to (intrinsically motivated) or for external reasons (extrinsically motivated).

## **Contentment with the Goal Pursuit**

According to the Oxford Dictionary contentment is the state of being happy or satisfied (Simpson et al., 1989). Analogously for our variable, to experience happiness and satisfaction with the goal pursuit, no matter where you are in the pursuit. Contentment and factors that directly influence contentment have been empirically unexplored. By looking at research on adjacent and contrasting variables, knowledge can be provided on what influences contentment in general, and possibly contentment with goal pursuit. So in this section, we will be discussing how satisfaction, well-being, and task-aversiveness are related constructs to contentment but different, and why contentment is important to study. Then we will discuss what has been shown to influence these related constructs, and finally, we will connect these findings and discuss what this implies for contentment.

So here we will start by stating what makes contentment related but different from the three constructs, satisfaction, well-being, and task aversiveness. Satisfaction could be seen as the contentment that comes from achieving something, thus is more achievement-oriented. Whereas contentment would mean enjoyment or happiness during the goal pursuit regardless of the success. Well-being on the other hand is an overarching concept in which contentment plays a central role (Ehrlich & Bipp, 2016; Seaton & Beaumont, 2015). And last, task aversiveness is typically defined in terms of how unpleasant or unenjoyable a task is to perform (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000). This definition is in contrast with contentment. Even though contentment and task aversiveness measure opposite qualities, they are not each other's opposite of the spectrum. The difference between these variables lies in that task aversiveness is always in direct relation with the task, while contentment with a task is in indirect relation with the task. Whether a task is aversive relies on the components: boringness, frustration, resentment (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000), but one can still be content with the task even when it is boring and frustrating. Contentment is more interesting for the scope of this study than

these related constructs, because of three reasons. Firstly, satisfaction is achievement-oriented, whereas contentment focuses on the experience of the goal pursuit unrelated to successful achievement. Using satisfaction would make the study about feelings that derive from successful goal pursuit. Secondly, well-being is too broad, we wanted it to be directly linked to the goal pursuit. And thirdly, task-aversiveness focuses too much on the specific task experience, whereas contentment is broader and a more personal experience.

There are no clear findings on contentment specifically, so in this paragraph, the findings of the related constructs will be discussed. Several studies suggest that the attainableness of a goal or the perceived attainableness of a goal is a factor that plays a role in the (subjective) well-being (Brunstein, n.d.; Teranishi Martinez et al., 2020). Procrastination is also linked to worse affective well-being (Balkis & Duru, 2016), procrastination is again triggered by task-aversiveness (Krause & Freund, 2014). Research from Wang et al. (2017) showed that high achievement goals are positively related to life satisfaction. This relationship was even more visible when participants were high in emotional reappraisal. This is in line with previous research that showed that emotional reappraisal is linked to increased well-being.

By putting these findings together, a deeper understanding can be formed on what mechanisms play a role in these relationships and what this implicates for contentment. Well-being has been shown to be affected by the attainableness of the goal and procrastination (Balkis & Duru, 2016; Brunstein, n.d.; Teranishi Martinez et al., 2020). These different relationships seem to share underlying mechanisms, namely the presence or lack of meaningfulness. When one sees their goal as impossible to attain, it feels meaningless to pursue it as the goal cannot be reached. The goal pursuit lacks meaning. Lack of meaning is also considered to be one of the components of task aversiveness (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000), which has been shown to lead to procrastination that again results in decreased affective well-

being (Balkis & Duru, 2016). Meaningfulness plays a role in the relationship between procrastination and well-being. As these are related constructs to contentment, this makes it likely that contentment is also influenced by meaningfulness. This is in line with the research suggesting that people who pursue more meaningful tasks experience higher life satisfaction (Park et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2006; Teranishi Martinez et al., 2020). Also, from Wang et al. (2017) it becomes clear that high emotional reappraisal is linked to higher life satisfaction and well-being. Emotional reappraisal is about changing how you make sense of things, which could be seen as giving meaning to something (Buhle et al., 2014). Meaningfulness, thus, seems to influence well-being, satisfaction, and task-aversiveness. This suggests that meaningfulness possibly influences contentment, and thus also influences the contentment with the goal pursuit.

### **Goal Focus**

When pursuing a goal, people can focus on two different aspects of the goal. One can either focus on the outcome or the process. In Freund & Hennecke (2015) outcome focus is the degree to which a person attends to the desired outcome and consequences of goal pursuit and process focus is the degree to which a person attends to the aspects of the goal that are related to the means. Process and outcome focus differ in three key ways. Firstly, process focus is more concrete while outcome focus is more abstract. Secondly, process focus takes place in a specific context, while outcomes focus generally does not depend on this. Thirdly, process focus guides goal-related actions and plans, while outcome focus provides direction and meaning (Freund & Hennecke, 2015). Till now, there is no clear literature on whether people generally prefer one type of goal focus. Also, goal focus is left undefined in whether it is trait-dependent or state-dependent. But the fact that studies have shown goal focus to be a variable that can be manipulated indicates that it is dependent on the context and thus can be considered a state-dependent variable.

Studies have shown that the focus people adapt can result in very different outcomes in goal pursuit. A combination of both goal foci leads to the best outcome regarding academic grades (Pham & Taylor, 1999). Nonetheless, when taking the two foci in comparison to each other, results are mostly in the advantage of process focus. Firstly, process focus alone leads to higher grades compared to an outcome focus. Secondly, by Kaftan & Freund (2020) it is shown that process focus is considered more adaptive against procrastination and maintaining self-regulation for working out. Thirdly, Pham & Taylor, (1999) indicated that process focus facilitates goal-directed behavior whereas outcome focus can even have negative effects on goal-directed behavior. Above all this, process focus is also positively related to meaningfulness, exercise satisfaction, and affective well-being (Kaftan & Freund, 2020).

Process focus till now has been the superior focus compared to outcome focus if we look at the past research. The two underlying reasons will be discussed here. Firstly, according to Pham & Taylor (1999), the concreteness and contextualization of process focus help to create the steps needed for the goal pursuit. This can help explain why process focus alone leads to higher grades compared to outcome focus alone. Secondly, process focus leads to more self-regulation than outcome focus, because of the contribution of the process focus to the effort heuristic and the escalation of commitment. Process focus in contrast to outcome focus is considered to be the degree to which a person attends to the means of the goal pursuit. If someone attends to the means, he or she can practically see the invested time that has been put in by the steps that have been taken within the goal pursuit. This contributes to the effort heuristic (Kruger et al., 2004), which explains that the perceived invested time is positively related to the perceived value of the outcome. Also, process focus adds to the escalation of commitment, as the higher the previous (perceived) investments were, the more likely it becomes to pursue future investments (Staw, 1976), suggesting process focus

increases commitment to the goal pursuit. Both of these phenomena help explain how process focus contributes more to self-regulation than outcome focus.

Goal focus influences the perceived value of the outcome and investments. This can be transcribed to meaningfulness one sees in their effort. Contentment with the goal pursuit seems to be influenced by meaningfulness. Therefore, it is likely that goal focus influences contentment with the goal pursuit. When people have varieties of goals, it can differ why they are pursuing these goals and it seems plausible that the how in pursuing this goal should be aligned with the why in order to reach higher contentment with the goal pursuit. The how in this case is the goal focus and the why is what we consider the type of motivation for pursuing the goal.

### **Motivation**

Motivation is the root of action and intention (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Someone is considered motivated when someone is energized and activated towards an end. While someone who has no inspiration to act is classified as unmotivated. However, motivation can be measured in more than only the amount of motivation. There are also different types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). These are derived from the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980). They can all be ordered along a spectrum, with lower and higher levels of self-determination. Research has specifically honed in on the distinction between two types of motivation, namely, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The distinction between the two types of motivation lies in where the determination to act comes from. Intrinsic motivation means that the determinedness to do something comes from within. In the purest form, this would mean that the actions that derive from this motivation are done for its own sake, for the pleasure and satisfaction that comes from the action itself. Extrinsic motivation means that the determinedness to do something comes from something else than the action (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).



The amount and the type of motivation play a clear role in whether someone pursues a goal or not, and how actively someone pursues it (Berjot et al., 2012; Koestner et al., 2008; Krause & Freund, 2014; Rani & Desiana, 2019). To understand why this is, we need to look at what motivation provides. When we see what motivation provides, the link between motivation and contentment will become clear. When someone is motivated, it means that someone has a driving reason for doing something. This driving reason can be considered as meaningfulness to act. So, motivation provides meaningfulness. This meaningfulness can come from within (intrinsically motivated) or this meaningfulness can be provided by external factors (extrinsically motivated). So, when someone is motivated, they experience more meaning to act, than someone who is not motivated. As contentment with the goal pursuit is also likely to be influenced by meaningfulness, we expect that motivation is related to the contentment someone experiences with the goal pursuit. Therefore intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be considered key moderators in the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit.

The type of goal focus is known to play a role in successful goal pursuit and well-being, especially process focus (Freund & Hennecke, 2012, 2015; Kaftan & Freund, 2020, 2020). However, when considering motivation, we expect different results. We expect that people with different motivations benefit from different approaches to become or stay content with their goal pursuit. This is due to differences between the types of motivation. An important difference between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation is that intrinsic motivation is not linked to the context. It comes from within. While extrinsic motivation is linked to the context. Also, an act that derives from intrinsic motivation is intrinsically motivating because it fulfills, it gives satisfaction out of the act itself. In other words, the act is meaningful. Therefore it is not necessary to provide this person with something external that adds meaning to the goal pursuit in order to become or stay content with the goal pursuit.

Providing this person with a concrete and contextualized plan on how to approach the goal pursuit could even have the same negative effect as giving extrinsic rewards (Deci, 1971; Ma et al., 2014). Process focus, which has plan-like characteristics (Freund & Hennecke, 2015), could take away the intrinsic joy someone has and thus negatively influence the contentment with the goal pursuit. For intrinsically motivated people feeling joy with the action comes naturally. Thus, an approach that does not intervene with this seems like the best approach. That is why we argue that people high on intrinsic motivation benefit more from an outcome focus approach: they do not need to focus precisely on the means necessary for goal pursuit because simply striving for their abstract outcome will make them content. However, people low on intrinsic motivation do not have this natural meaningful drive, thus they will most likely benefit more from a process-focused approach. This can provide meaning to their goal pursuit (Kaftan & Freund, 2020), likely resulting in higher contentment with the goal pursuit. This leads to the following hypothesis.

**Moderation Hypothesis 1.** For participants with high intrinsic motivation, an outcome-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to a process-focused approach, whereas for participants with low intrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach.

The disadvantages of process focus for the intrinsically motivated people could be the advantages for the extrinsically motivated people. They would rather benefit from focusing on concrete and context-related tasks as this can provide meaning and more goal-directed behavior (Freund & Hennecke, 2015; Kaftan & Freund, 2020), as this does not come naturally for this group. However, we expect that low extrinsic motivation does not play a role in the relation between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit, because of the heterogeneous nature of this group.

**Moderation Hypothesis 2.** For participants with high extrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach, whereas for participants with low extrinsic motivation there will be no difference between the two foci.

### **Present research**

In our research, we will have participants come up with their own goals to pursue. We will manipulate the goal focus they use in their goal pursuit and measure the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of the participants regarding the goal. Five days later we will give them a questionnaire to measure their contentment with the goal pursuit. We believe the present study is novel in three key ways. Firstly, our study will be high in realism because we let the participant completely free in their goal choice. This is different from previous research on goal focus, where it were mostly context-specific and concrete goals assigned to the participants such as following a working or diet program, or academic achievement (Freund & Hennecke, 2012; Kaftan & Freund, 2020; Pham & Taylor, 1999). Secondly, contentment with the goal pursuit is relatively unresearched as a dependent variable, while adjacent and contrasting variables have been. Therefore alone, this present research will bring new insights. Thirdly, it will be one of the first studies that will experimentally look at the interaction between goal focus, and intrinsic -, extrinsic motivation. These constructs are known to have similar characteristics nevertheless are distinct from each other (Freund et al., 2012). Having said that, the interaction between the types of motivation and goal focus is still relatively unresearched. So overall, the present research will be high in realism, perform research on a relatively unexplored dependent variable, and zoom in on an unexplored interaction.

## Method Section

### Participants and Design

There were a total of 267 cases. However, 202 cases were removed due to incompleteness. Out of the 202 removed cases, 141 did not finish part 1. The vast majority of the 141, did not even fill in question 1 and were just people who opened the survey and decided not to participate at that moment. Of the 126 who did fill in part 1, 5 forgot to submit their answers. Consequently, these participants did not receive the link to the second questionnaire. Out of the remaining 121 participants who did fill in part 1 and submitted it, only 65 filled out part 2. One case had to be removed because this person indicated on a seriousness check that they did not take part seriously. Of the 64 cases remaining 4 were removed because they indicated to have switched goals between part 1 and 2. Due to this, we could no longer rely on our manipulation of goal focus for these participants. Thus, we had a total of 60 participants, of which 35 were female, 34 male, and 1 did not wish to share their gender (Age:  $M = 31.58$ ,  $SD = 14.62$  (range between 17 and 66)). The participants were found by connecting our network via the social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. Also, first-year psychology students at the University of Groningen could participate in the study to obtain Sona credits for a first-year course.

We used a between-subjects design, with one independent variable (goal focus) with two conditions (process focus or outcome focus) The participants were randomly assigned to one of the goal focus conditions. We measured the dependent variable (contentment with goal pursuit) and two moderators (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation). This study was part of a bigger project which included additional variables, which will not be discussed for it is not within the scope of this study.

## **Materials and Procedure**

We performed an online Qualtrics study. The study consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants gave their consent, before they went on with the questionnaire.

### ***Goal recall task***

We instructed the participant to pick a goal. This goal could be a goal that they were currently working on or a new goal. It could be as small or big as they would like. The participants, however, were not allowed to pick a goal that they had been working on for longer than 3 months. This was decided because we reasoned that the goal focus would be difficult to manipulate when someone has already pursued a goal for so long and may have developed ingrained strategies. When they chose a goal, they had to briefly state what it was, so we could later check whether it was a serious goal.

### ***Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation***

After the goal recall task, we gave them a questionnaire to measure their intrinsic ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ) and extrinsic motivation ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) for their goal. To measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation we took 8 Items (4 for intrinsic motivation and 4 for extrinsic motivation) from the Situational Motivation Scale (Guay et al., 2001). We changed the items minimally to make them fit in the context of goal pursuit. This gave the following type of items (intrinsic motivation item: “I have this goal because I think that pursuing this goal is interesting”; extrinsic motivation item: “I have this goal because it is something that I have to pursue”) (rated on a scale from 1= strongly disagree, to 7= strongly agree).

### ***Goal focus manipulation***

Once we measured our moderators, we randomly assigned the participants either to the process focus or the outcomes focus condition. In each condition, we showed them an inspirational quote on the screen (“Begin with the End in Mind” for the outcome focus condition; “a Goal without a Plan is just a Wish” for the process focus condition.). We added

these quotes to give the participants a concrete and easy-to-grasp mindset that was in line with the goal focus condition they were in. Then, the outcome focus condition got a text stating that current research has shown that, when pursuing a goal, focusing on the desired outcome is a very effective approach to achieve one's goal. The process focus condition got a text stating that current research has shown that, when pursuing a goal, focusing on the tasks you need to complete is a very effective approach to achieve one's goal. With these texts, we tried to convince them that the goal focus approach assigned to their condition is very beneficial. Then we asked participants to visualize the process or the outcome focus on their chosen goal before asking them three questions according to their condition. For example, in the process focus condition, we asked participants "Please describe three ways in which you can work on your goal right now". In the outcome focus condition, we would then ask the same question, but oriented towards the participant's desired outcome ("Please describe what your desired outcome would look like"). By letting them answer these questions we manipulate the participants into adopting a certain type of goal focus. Once they completed the exercises we gave them a final instruction, instructing them that as they work on their goal over the next 5 days, to make sure to focus on either the desired outcome or the tasks they need to do to achieve their goal, depending on the condition. Also, reminding them that it is likely to help with their goal pursuit.

### ***Contentment with the goal pursuit***

In between the first and the second part of the study they were sent a reminder to attain a type of goal focus. Then 5 days after the first part, they were emailed the link to the second part of the study. In the second part of the study, we gave them a questionnaire measuring the contentment with the goal pursuit ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). This measurement was based on the Contentment with Life Assessment Scale (Lavalley et al., n.d.), but then minimally changed so it was suitable for contentment with the goal pursuit. Our measure consisted of 5

items of which two were reversed coded. Here are two sample items (normal coded: “I am very content with my goal pursuit”; reverse coded: “When I examine my goal pursuit as a whole, I feel I am not meeting my aspirations”) (rated on a scale from 1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree).

### ***Manipulation check***

After this we performed a manipulation check of our goal focus manipulation by providing the participants with a 7-point scale in which they could indicate whether over the last couple of days they focused on the process, the outcome, or both (rated on a scale from 1 = focused on the process towards the goal, to 7 = focused on the outcome of the goal). We also checked whether they stuck to the same goal by asking participants whether they stuck to the same goal (*Yes/No*) and to write down their initial goal (“Please write down once more what your initial goal was. If you changed the goal during the last few days, please state both goals and indicate which was the initial, and which was the new goal.”).

Finally, we collected demographic information, performed a seriousness check, which was a self-report measure from the participants that indicated whether they participated seriously. After this, we ended with a debrief.

## **Results**

We analyzed our data using SPSS and PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). A Shapiro-Wilk test showed a significant departure from normality,  $W(59) = 0.956, p = 0.03$ . This, however, was a slight deviation, plus, the skewness of 0.02 ( $SD = 0.31$ ) and kurtosis of - 1.0 ( $SD = 0.61$ ) showed strong enough symmetry. Thus, we proceeded as planned.

### **Manipulation Check**

To test whether our manipulation of the independent variable worked as intended we performed a univariate ANOVA with our goal focus manipulation as the independent variable and our manipulation check item (where we asked participants to what extent they

had focused on their outcome, the process during their goal pursuit or both) as the dependent variable. It showed that our manipulation had a marginally significant effect on our check,  $F(1,59) = 2.798, p = 0.10$ . As expected, the participants in the outcome focus condition scored higher on our manipulation check ( $M = 4.42, SD = 1.82$ ) than participants in the process focus condition ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.84$ ). Due to the marginally significant result, we must interpret the results of the analysis with caution.

### **Moderating Role of Intrinsic Motivation**

To test our first hypothesis, that for participants with high intrinsic motivation, an outcome-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to a process-focused approach, whereas for participants with low intrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach, we ran a moderator analysis with goal focus as the independent variable, contentment with the goal pursuit as the dependent variable, and intrinsic motivation as the moderator. The results showed a marginally significant interaction effect,  $t(59) = 1.45, p = 0.15$ . This suggests that intrinsic motivation moderated the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. Looking closer at the moderation, the results were partly in line with hypothesis 1. There was a marginally significant conditional effect for participants with low intrinsic motivation,  $t(59) = -1.40, p = 0.17$ . This indicates that participants with low intrinsic motivation have higher contentment with the goal pursuit using a process-focused approach compared to an outcome-focused approach. This is in line with our prediction that process focus would contribute more to contentment with the goal pursuit for people with low intrinsic motivation. Contrary to our prediction that outcome focus would contribute more to contentment with the goal pursuit, there was no significant conditional effect for participants with high intrinsic motivation,  $t(59) = 0.68, p = 0.5$ . This thus suggests that the type of goal focus did not affect the level of contentment for these participants. The



main effect of goal focus was not significant,  $t(59) = -0.51, p = 0.61$ . Participants in the process focus condition ( $M = 4.23, SD = 0.26$ ) and outcome focus condition ( $M = 4.23, SD = 0.23$ ) reported nearly identical levels of contentment. The main effect of intrinsic motivation was not significant either  $t(59) = 0.98, p = 0.33$ .

### **Moderating Role of Extrinsic Motivation**

To test our second hypothesis, that for participants with high extrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach, whereas for participants with low extrinsic motivation there will be no difference between the two foci, we ran a moderator analysis with goal focus as the independent variable, contentment with the goal pursuit as the dependent variable, and extrinsic motivation as the moderator. Contrary to what we predicted, the results showed no significant interaction effect,  $t(59) = -0.11, p = 0.91$ . Suggesting that extrinsic motivation does not influence the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. The results of the main effect of goal focus were the same as with intrinsic motivation as the moderator. The main effect of extrinsic motivation was not significant,  $t(56) = -0.57, p = 0.57$ .

### **Explorative Analysis**

For our manipulation did not work fully as intended, we wanted to repeat our main analysis with the manipulation check as the independent variable instead. This manipulation check measured the type of goal focus that participants reported actually using during the goal pursuit that was part of the study. Using this variable as the independent variable we can further explore whether intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a role in the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit.

Thus, to explore further and test our hypothesis 1 we ran another moderator analysis with the manipulation check as the independent variable, contentment with the goal pursuit as

the dependent variable, and intrinsic motivation as the moderator. The results showed no significant interaction effect,  $t(59) = 0.59, p = 0.56$ . Also, no main effect was found,  $t(59) = 0.39, p = 0.70$ . These results were not in line with hypothesis 1. We did the same analysis again, but this time with extrinsic motivation as the moderator. The interaction effect was not significant,  $t(59) = -0.66, p = 0.51$ . The main effect was also not significant,  $t(59) = 0.33, p = 0.75$ . These results were not in line with hypothesis 2.

### **Discussion**

In this study, we had two hypotheses. Our first hypothesis stated that for participants with high intrinsic motivation, an outcome-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to a process-focused approach, whereas for participants with low intrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach.

Our second hypothesis stated that for participants with high extrinsic motivation, a process-focused approach will lead to higher contentment with the goal pursuit compared to an outcome-focused approach, whereas for participants with low extrinsic motivation there will be no difference between the two foci. The results partly supported our first hypothesis by indicating that there is a marginally significant interaction effect of intrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. Marginally significant results showed that participants low on intrinsic motivation got higher contentment with the goal pursuit using the process-focused approach compared to the outcome-focused approach. However, no conditional effect was found for participants high on intrinsic motivation. The results did not support our second hypothesis, for there was no significant interaction effect found with the moderator extrinsic motivation. Overall, we found that no significant results are showing that an outcome focus leads to more

contentment under any circumstances, and that process focus only leads to more contentment for those low in intrinsic motivation.

In the following section, we will discuss possible explanations for these findings, by first discussing the manipulation, then intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and the lack of the main effect, before discussing the theoretical implications of our findings.

### **Manipulation**

Before we discuss our interpretation of our findings, we will first discuss two possible explanations on why our manipulation did not work as expected. We found a close to significant, but insignificant difference, between the two conditions in the degree to which they reported having focused on the process or outcome during their goal pursuit. Due to this, we will have to interpret our findings with the necessary caution.

One reason for this can be found in the way we manipulated our participants. We chose a relatively indirect way to manipulate the participants, for we wanted to keep the realism of the experiment high. In this study, the manipulation consisted of the following four parts. First, participants read a quote fitting their assigned goal focus, this was meant as an incentive to create a mindset that was in line with the goal focus condition they were in. Second, participants from the process focus condition were asked to read a text stating that current research has shown that, when pursuing a goal, focusing on the tasks you need to complete is a very effective approach to achieve one's goal, while for participants from the outcome focus condition it was a text stating that current research has shown that, when pursuing a goal, focusing on the desired outcome is a very effective approach to achieve one's goal. Third, we gave them exercises that made them approach their goal pursuit with the goal focus assigned to their condition. Finally, we reminded them of the benefits of this specific goal focus. These manipulations did not directly order the participants to use a certain goal focus in their goal pursuit. We merely incentivized them. It is a possibility that

this manipulation was not enough to change their habitual (cognitive and behavioral) approach in goal pursuits, and they perhaps needed a more direct manipulation to adapt their goal focus for this goal pursuit.

Another explanation could be that the manipulation check itself was not reliable. The manipulation check was based on the self-reported goal focus of the participants. Asking them to indicate what type of goal focus they think they used (rated on a scale from 1 = focused on the process towards the goal, to 7 = focused on the outcome of the goal). For this, we expect that the participants understood clearly, the difference between the outcome and the process focus approach. However, we chose to only inform the participants about the benefits of one type of goal focus because we did not want to explain both foci as part of our manipulation out of fear of triggering the wrong focus by accident. So, the participants knew nothing about the other type of goal focus and only knew about the benefits of one goal focus. Thus, they were not provided with a clear definition for any of the goal focus. Likely, this was not enough for the participants to fully grasp the different types of goal focus and their differences, making the self-reported goal focus not fully qualified for the manipulation check. Therefore, the manipulation check is less reliable. If the manipulation check is unreliable, it would mean that we cannot truly know whether our findings are reflecting reality or the results of weak manipulation, for we do not know whether the manipulation was successful.

### **Intrinsic motivation**

In this subsection, the possible explanation for the findings regarding intrinsic motivation will be discussed. The interaction effect of intrinsic motivation is only marginally significant; however, it would not be surprising if that is due to the low sample size, therefore it is worth discussing as an interesting finding, but still with the necessary caution. Two types of explanations for the findings will be discussed here. The first possible explanation can be

found by looking at previous research. Looking at this the found interaction effect of intrinsic motivation seems unsurprising. There is research defining intrinsic motivation as experiencing enjoyment or interest in the goal-relevant activity. Also, it is associated with voluntary involvement, more interest, and higher persistence in a task or goal (Koestner et al., 2008; Krapp, 2005). In addition to this, there is literature on the positive influence of intrinsic motivation on related constructs to contentment such as satisfaction and well-being (Jetzke & Mutz, 2020; Martín-Albo et al., 2012). This suggests that people high on intrinsic motivation already have natural qualities to obtain higher contentment with the goal pursuit and thus do not necessarily benefit from either of the two goal foci. These qualities are something participants low on intrinsic motivation do not naturally have, thus they need to have something else to provide these qualities. According to Freund et al, (2012) intrinsic motivation entails focusing on the process. So, when intrinsic motivation is low, a process-focused approach may artificially replace these intrinsic motivation qualities. Meaning that qualities provided by intrinsic motivation, which promote contentment, are now provided by the process-focused approach. Possibly explaining why for participants low on intrinsic motivation the process focus approach leads to higher contentment with the goal pursuit than the outcome focus approach. Thus, looking at this previous literature our findings seem unsurprising. However, a simple linear regression (with our data) between the variable's intrinsic motivation and contentment with the goal pursuit showed no significant effect,  $t(59) = 0.622, p = 0.54$ . This shows that intrinsic motivation does not predict contentment ( $\beta = 0.08, p = 0.54$ ). So, the earlier provided explanation, that intrinsic motivation influences contentment and that for the people low on intrinsic motivation a process focus might artificially provide qualities of intrinsic motivation, does not hold after this analysis. This can thus not explain our findings.

A more likely explanation for our findings can be found in that the contrast between a process-focused approach and an outcome-focused approach is a lot more noticeable for people low on intrinsic motivation compared to people high on intrinsic motivation. This is because low intrinsically motivated people compared to highly intrinsically motivated people need more external help to make a task meaningful, and thus to avoid procrastination (Balkis & Duru, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Procrastination is negatively related to related constructs of contentment such as well-being and satisfaction (Balkis & Duru, 2016), while meaningfulness is positively associated with these constructs (Park et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2006; Teranishi Martinez et al., 2020). Process focus, in turn, is known to increase meaningfulness and decrease procrastination, while outcome focus is not known for these benefits (Kaftan & Freund, 2020). Thus, this could explain how process focus results in significantly higher contentment with the goal pursuit than outcome focus for participants low on intrinsic motivation, while for people high on intrinsic motivation there is no significant benefit to any of the goal foci.

So, the marginally significant interaction effect of intrinsic motivation is not as much that a process-focused approach triggers qualities of intrinsic motivation, but rather that it increases meaningfulness and decreases procrastination, which are responsible for the increase in contentment with the goal pursuit. This effect is significant for people low on intrinsic motivation, whereas for people high on intrinsic motivation this effect is not significant as they do not need external help to increase meaningfulness and decrease procrastination.

### **Extrinsic motivation**

In this subsection, possible explanations for the insignificant interaction effect of extrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit will be discussed. The findings showed that whether someone is high in extrinsic

motivation or low, it does not affect the relationship between goal focus and the contentment with the goal pursuit. This was contrasting to our predictions. We expected that people high on extrinsic motivation would benefit from a process focus as this can provide meaning and more goal-directed behavior (Freund & Hennecke, 2015; Kaftan & Freund, 2020), which is something they do not naturally have like people with high intrinsic motivation (Koestner et al., 2008; Krapp, 2005). We predicted that this increase in meaning and goal-directed behavior will lead to more contentment with the goal pursuit. Important to state is that we considered high extrinsic motivation to have opposing effects on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit compared to high intrinsic motivation. Based on the conception that intrinsic motivation provides meaning naturally, while people with high extrinsic motivation need external help in the form of a process-focused approach to provide them with more meaning. However, this prediction was not in line with the findings. One major explanation on why the prediction was not in line with our results is that our conception that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have opposing effects is a misconception. Studies have shown that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not opposites and can even coexist (Koestner et al., 2008). Our prediction was therefore based on a misconception. By looking into preexisting literature afresh, no true explanations can be found for the no difference, as the influence of extrinsic motivation is a relatively unresearched topic. Extrinsic motivation has been mostly researched as the dependent variable. However, two possible influences could help explain the results. Firstly, we did not control for intrinsic motivation when measuring extrinsic motivation. Therefore, intrinsic motivation could have been a confounding variable. For example, a participant that has a high extrinsic motivation and low intrinsic motivation could have the same results as someone with low extrinsic motivation but a high intrinsic motivation, not due to no significant difference between the degree of extrinsic motivation, but rather due to the interfering effect

of intrinsic motivation that is canceling out the different effects of the degrees of extrinsic motivation. Secondly, another possible influence on the results could be lying in the very broad definition that extrinsic motivation has. Extrinsic motivation, according to the self-determination theory, can vary substantially in the degree to which it is autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Someone who performs an act because he will otherwise receive punishment and someone who performs an act because he thinks it is part of who he is, both fall under the category of extrinsic motivation. This could be problematic if these types of extrinsic motivation that differ in autonomy would produce conflicting effects. So, taking both the moderator intrinsic motivation and the additional moderator autonomy into account would have given us clearer results.

### **No main effect**

A surprising and contrasting finding was that there was no main effect between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. Previous research has shown that process focus leads to higher well-being, higher satisfaction, and a decrease in task-aversiveness (Freund et al., 2012; Freund & Hennecke, 2015; Kaftan & Freund, 2020; Krause & Freund, 2014; Pham & Taylor, 1999), which are all related constructs to contentment. Two possible explanations for our contradicting finding will be discussed in this subsection. Firstly, by looking at the difference between the set-up of our experiment and the previous experiments done on goal focus, an explanation can be found for this contrasting finding. A key aspect of our experiment was to let the participants come up with their own goals, already existing or new. Due to this the goal types were very broad and always from the person itself. Compare this to previous studies, where the participants were assigned the same goals, such as a workout regime, diet program, or academic achievement. For people having these kinds of goals, process focus leads to higher well-being and satisfaction. However, these types of goals are relatively concrete and linked to the context. Abstract goals are thus not included in these



studies, while people can have abstract goals. These 'plan' like characteristics are promoted by a process-focused approach (Freund & Hennecke, 2012; Kaftan & Freund, 2020; Pham & Taylor, 1999). So, the reason for the different findings in our study compared to the previous studies could be that the previous studies have used goals that are biased towards the process-focused approach. Perhaps more abstract goals would benefit from an outcome-focused approach as this promotes characteristics such as decontextualized and abstractness (Freund & Hennecke, 2015). Thus, the results of these studies may not be generalized to more abstract goals. So, it is likely that in our study the effects of the abstract and concrete goals canceled each other out, resulting in no main effect. Secondly, another possible explanation for this can be that we simply did not manipulate the variable well enough. This can be countered by the results of our explorative analysis, in which we used the self-reported goal focus of the participants instead of the manipulated goal focus. This finding of this analysis also indicated that there was no significant relationship between goal focus and the contentment with the goal pursuit.

What was peculiar is the fact that our main analysis, in which we used the manipulated variable goal focus, showed a marginally significant interaction effect for intrinsic motivation, while in our explorative analysis, in which we used the self-reported goal focus, it did not show an interaction effect for intrinsic motivation. If we were to believe our explorative analysis, the marginally significant interaction effect, found with the main analysis, does not reflect reality. However, the explorative analysis was based on the self-reported goal focus of the participants. As discussed earlier, it is possible that this manipulation check is not reliable, this consequently makes the explorative analysis less reliable.

## **Theoretical Implications**

The findings from this study on its own do not lead to anything conclusive about the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. However, this study has provided us with two interesting insights. Firstly, the likely explanation for the (marginally) significant interaction effect of intrinsic motivation gave us a deeper understanding of the possibility that process focus has beneficial effects by increasing meaningfulness and decreasing procrastination, rather than by increasing qualities of intrinsic motivation. Secondly, the notion that process focus is the goal focus with the most beneficial effects has been viewed through a new perspective, shining a light on the fact that many of the studies showing this effect used very concrete goals. This opens the possibility that more abstract goals might benefit more from an outcome-focused approach.

## **Limitations**

In this subsection, four limitations of this study will be discussed. One limitation was the relatively low sample size. Both a practical and a methodological explanation can be provided for this. Firstly, the practical explanation is that we did not have enough time to collect more data. A simple solution for this would be to implement more time to collect the data. The second, methodological, explanation has to do with the way we introduced our study at the beginning of the Qualtrics questionnaire. Here, we tried to remain abstract in our description on how to pick a goal, for we did not want to influence the participants in their goal picking more than necessary. As a consequence, we did not clarify that the participants could pick any goal they wanted (small, large, new, difficult, easy) and that it did not have to be achieved within those 5 days. This misunderstanding could have led people to believe that this study was too big of a commitment and due to that they did not even start the questionnaire. So in future experiments, it should be made clear what a goal is and what it

means in the context of this study. However, no examples should be given as this would already steer them in a direction. The second limitation derives from the uncontrolled goal recall task. Participants had to come up with their own goals. This led the definition of the word goal open for interpretation and thus to be very broad. This did make our study high in realism. However, after the goal recall task, these goals could have been categorized into different types of goals by coding. This would have given us more data to work with and solidify certain explanations. This should be considered in future research. Thirdly, we did not account for the interaction effect between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, due to this these moderators could have confounded the results of each other. Future research should check this interaction effect. Lastly, we did not measure the actual progress in the goal pursuit, for we wanted to focus on someone's subjective experience of the goal pursuit. However, also measuring successful goal pursuit would have given a fuller understanding of goal pursuit. So, future research should not only measure contentment with the goal pursuit but also successful goal pursuit.

### **Future Research**

Firstly, this study has shined a light on the possibility that different types of goals, such as abstract and concrete goals, might benefit from different types of goal focus. Future research needs to investigate the moderating role of the type of goal (abstract or concrete) in the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal (and the successfulness of the goal pursuit). Findings on this could help people to structure their goal pursuit in ways that are beneficial for their pursuit. Secondly, future research should dive deeper into understanding how process focus can lead to an increase in meaningfulness and a decrease in procrastination for people low on intrinsic motivation. Understanding this could help people who are struggling with procrastination to overcome this. Finally, future research on motivation could use self-determinedness described by the SDT as a variable instead of using

constructs such as intrinsic-, extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980). This could give a more precise indication of the true nature of someone's motivation as motivation generally can be very broad.

### **Conclusion**

In this research, we studied the moderating effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on the relationship between goal focus and contentment with the goal pursuit. We found one marginally significant finding, showing that people low on intrinsic motivation experience higher contentment with the goal pursuit using a process focus compared to using an outcome focus. This could be explained by the effect of process focus on procrastination and meaningfulness. The interaction effect of extrinsic motivation was found to be non-significant. One interesting finding was the no main effect between goal focus and the contentment with the goal pursuit, as this is contrary to previous research. This difference could be due to our methodological setup to let participants free in their goal choice. What became clear from this study is that the type of goals and the type of motivation behind goal pursuits vary distinctively and it seems that there is no true universal approach in goal pursuit, but adopting a process focus approach is the most beneficial, as it showed to always be at least as effective as an outcome focus.

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