The Effect of Goal Focus on Successful Goal Pursuit: the Role of Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Pursuing personally meaningful goals is central to human beings as it provides a sense of meaning and direction. Goal focus – the extent to which one focuses on the means or the outcomes of their goal – has been shown to yield beneficial effects that facilitate goal pursuit. Self-esteem has also been linked to influential factors in decision-making and goal pursuit. While studies regarding goal focus and successful goal pursuit exist, little is known about potential moderating effects of self-esteem on this relationship. This experimental study investigated the moderator hypothesis that for individuals low in self-esteem, an outcome focus will result in higher chances of successful goal pursuit, whereas for individuals high in self-esteem, a process focus will result in higher chances of successful goal pursuit. Participants ($N = 60$) were first-year students participating in exchange for course credits and individuals recruited through various social media. A between-subjects design was adopted where for 5 days, participants focused on the process or the outcome of a self-chosen goal. Contrary to the hypothesis, results showed no significant interaction effect, ($t(59) = -.40$, $p =.69$). Thus, no evidence suggests that self-esteem moderated the relationship between goal focus and successful goal pursuit. In contrast, a surprisingly marginally significant effect for the manipulation was found ($t(59)= 1.70$, $p =.09$). This indicated that the more participants adopted an outcome (versus a process) focus, the more successfully they pursued their goals. Implications of these results have been discussed.

Keywords: goal focus, process, outcome, successful goal pursuit, self-esteem, individual differences

The Effect of Goal Focus on Successful Goal Pursuit: the Role of Self-Esteem

Albert Einstein once said, "If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things." This quote highlights goals' importance and centrality to human beings, as individuals live by determining desirable states to achieve (or undesirable states to avoid) and the actions that best help them attain (or avoid) these states (Freund & Hennecke, 2015). Goal pursuit has been linked to multiple positive outcomes, such as subjective well-being, better performance, higher levels of motivation (Freund & Hennecke, 2015), and acquisition of new skills (Freund et al., 2012). In addition, pursuing personally meaningful goals provides a sense of meaning and direction (Emmons, 1996).

It seems therefore important to analyze the factors that can best help individuals achieve their goals, as the inability to successfully do so might have detrimental effects on their well-being (Simmen-Janevska et al., 2012). A particularly promising factor influencing successful goal pursuit may be goal focus, which refers to process focus, or the degree to which an individual attends to the means aspects of goal pursuit, and to outcome focus, or the degree to which an individual attends to the desired outcomes and consequences of goal pursuit(Freund & Hennecke, 2015). Another relevant factor may be self-esteem, an individual difference that has been neglected in the context of goal pursuit. As past research was mainly concerned with exploring the benefits of goal focus based on the goal's characteristics or the stages of goal pursuit, studying individual differences and their relation to successful goal pursuit is crucial. In addition, possible results might shed light on theoretical and practical implications not yet explored. Among several individual differences, self-esteem is an outstanding factor in decision-making and goal setting, given its links to decisiveness, procrastination, motivation, self-regulation, persistence, and resilience (Bosson & Swann, 2009). These factors, in turn, play an important role in the pursuit and achievement of personal goals and aspirations (Orth et al., 2012). Therefore, it is the aim of the present study

to explore the effects of goal focus on successful goal pursuit, and the extent to which this relationship is moderated by one's self-esteem.

Successful Goal Pursuit

The tendency to set new goals is pervasive, especially at a temporal milestone. For instance, polls concerning New Year's resolutions suggest that 44% of U.S. participants have been likely or very likely to set new goals for the upcoming year (Oscarsson et al., 2020). Providing a definition of goals seems to be crucial to understand their role in individuals' lives. Kruglanski (1996) conceptualized them as cognitive representations of states that are personally desired (or dreaded) to be approached (or avoided) through certain means. Simply holding a goal, however, is not enough to bring about its achievement thus, how can individuals best achieve their goals? The concept of goal pursuit seems to provide an answer to this matter. Goal pursuit is the process of attempting to achieve a desired future outcome (Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997). It seems that many individuals, despite managing to identify the goals they want to pursue, struggle to complete the steps necessary to achieve them. New Year's resolutions studies showed that 77% of participants maintained their resolutions in the first week of the year. However, this number decreased to 55% after one month, 40% after six months, and reached 19% after two years (Norcross & Vangarelli, 1988).

When trying to answer the question of how individuals best pursue their goals, three factors distinguish themselves for being most effective. First, by using implementation intentions, individuals can plan the where, when, and how of goal pursuit in the form of 'If I encounter situation X, then I will perform goal-directed behavior Y' (Gollwitzer, 1999). By doing so, they can switch from conscious and effortful control of their goal-directed behaviors to an automatic control provided by cues in the environment (Gollwitzer, 1999). However, when the necessary resources, skills, and cooperation to perform the intended action lack, an

intention-behavior gap might result which, in turn, can hinder goal pursuit (Gollwitzer, 1999).

Second, mental contrasting of the desired outcome with one's actual state increases the levels

of involvement and commitment with one's goal, therefore facilitating goal pursuit

(Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010). Further, when combined with implementation intentions,

mental contrasting is even more effective than each of these strategies alone (Kaftan &

Freund, 2018). Third, goal commitment, or one's determination to extend effort towards a

goal over time to achieve it (Locke & Latham, 1990), affects goal pursuit by influencing

motivational levels and performance. Moreover, it has been linked to higher effort and

persistence, especially when a goal is demanding. Further factors supporting goal progress

and achievement include persistence, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and optimism (Kaftan &

Freund, 2018). Finally, a more novel and promising factor, goal focus, could play a key role

in promoting successful goal pursuit. This factor, unlike the several strategies already

mentioned, could be very easily adopted by individuals who wish to successfully attain their

goals.

Goal focus

Goals are cognitive representations connecting means to outcomes of goal pursuit. In

this context then, the concept of goal focus refers to process focus, or the degree to which an

individual attends to the aspects of the goal that are related to the means, and to outcome

focus, or the degree to which an individual attends to the desired outcomes and consequences

of goal pursuit (Freund & Hennecke, 2012). Generally, the process is more proximal and

concrete while its counterpart tends to be more distal and abstract. Similarly, the situational

context in which the process of goal pursuit takes place tends to be specific, in contrast to the

outcome of goal pursuit, which tends to be more decontextualized (Freund & Hennecke,

2015). Other research suggests that goal focus is more a state-like factor, with individuals

focusing mainly on one of the two foci at a given time (Freund et al., 2010). In addition,

evidence suggests that individuals may differ (across different goals and situations and among each other) in the extent to which they focus on the process or outcome of goal pursuit (Kaftan & Freund, 2020). For instance, there seem to be age-related differences, with younger adults preferring an outcome focus while older adults preferring a process focus (Freund et al., 2010).

A process focus has been shown to have three benefits. First, process focus has been linked to subjective well-being. In fact, greater persistence, higher levels of goal satisfaction, and higher levels of affective well-being have been reported by process-focused individuals (Freund et al., 2010). Second, a process focus is more beneficial to successful goal pursuit and achievement than an outcome focus as means usually provide the individual with guidelines for goal-relevant actions (Emmons, 1996). This seems the case especially when goal pursuit is perceived as difficult. Third, a process focus has been linked to higher performance and academic success (Pham & Taylor, 1999).

However, an outcome focus has also been shown to have three benefits. First, outcomes typically provide a comparison between one's actual and desired state, therefore providing standards for goal achievement. According to Oettingen and Wadden (1991), this discrepancy can be a source of motivation to engage in outcome-relevant actions. Second, the more abstract representations of outcomes set the standard according to which the means' appropriateness is measured. Outcomes then, give these means direction and meaning (Little, 1989). Third, an outcome focus has been found more beneficial for motivation when combined with a process focus than a process focus alone (Pham & Taylor, 1999).

Three reasons are relevant to explain why a process focus seems to be more adaptive than an outcome focus. First, a process focus provides salient guidelines for goal-relevant actions which, in turn, help identify the necessary steps to reach the goal. For instance, when a goal is demanding with respect to self-regulation, a task is difficult or needs to be learned

because new (Freund et al., 2010), a process focus is particularly beneficial because it allows individuals to make fewer errors. Second, process-focused individuals are more likely to persist in a given activity if they experience it as rewarding (Freund & Hennecke, 2015). Third, when the level of effort invested in goal pursuit is high, means come to be seen as more valuable and instrumental. In contrast, an outcome focus may distract from practicing and acquiring the goal-relevant means and consequently, hinder one's ability to successfully achieve their goal (Kaftan & Freund, 2018).

Until now, the reviewed evidence seems to support the adaptiveness of a process focus over an outcome focus. Three notions could potentially challenge this view. First, an outcome focus may be beneficial in specific phases of goal pursuit (Kaftan & Freund, 2018). For instance, when working on the goal has just started and the finishing line is still far away, an outcome focus may distract from the implementation of goal-relevant actions (Kaftan & Freund, 2018). On the other hand, when working on the goal for a longer time, an outcome focus might provide a final boost of motivation and thus, be more beneficial. Second, an individual focusing on the process might feel overwhelmed by the task details, whereas an individual focusing on the outcome might get less distracted by alternative activities and persist more (Kaftan & Freund, 2018). Third, it might be beneficial to switch from a process to an outcome focus after acquiring the skills necessary to master a task (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999).

Taken together, goal focus seems to be a promising factor that might promote successful goal pursuit. Nevertheless, current research has mainly focused on how the two foci may affect individuals depending on the characteristics of the goal or at different stages of goal pursuit. What seems to have been neglected are the potential benefits of a certain focus based on individual differences. Among these, self-esteem distinguishes itself for predicting a wealth of important life aspects, as well as persistence and resilience in pursuing

and achieving personal goals and aspirations (Orth et al., 2012). It seems plausible that the effect of goal focus on successful goal pursuit might be crucially dependent on this key factor, therefore it was hypothesized that individuals with high levels versus individuals with low levels of self-esteem might benefit from a different type of focus, either process or outcome focus.

Self-esteem

Extensive research has suggested that self-esteem, particularly in high levels, is a predictor rather than a consequence of life success (Orth et al., 2012). These studies covered a wide range of crucial life aspects, including satisfaction in close relationships and marriage, physical health, mental health, social-network size and social support, education, employment status, job satisfaction, job success, and criminal behavior (Orth et al., 2012). Self-esteem represents the affective component of one's self-concept and, specifically, the degree to which its qualities and characteristics are perceived to be positive or negative. It reflects individuals' physical self-image, values, view of their capabilities, perceived success, as well as the way others view and respond to them (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2018). In addition, the distinction between trait self-esteem and state self-esteem has been made, with the former reflecting an individual's long-term, typical, affective self-evaluation and the latter reflecting an individual's affective self-evaluation in a particular situation (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Finally, since self-esteem is, by definition, a subjective judgment, it may not directly reflect the individual's objective capabilities or accomplishments (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

High self-esteem has been associated with several positive effects. First, individuals high in self-esteem tend to experience fewer negative emotions such as hostility, anxiety, and depression (Bosson & Swann, 2009). Second, high self-esteem promotes prosocial behavior (Hay et al., 2021), which in turn, has been shown to reduce the detrimental effects of stress on mental health and mood (Raposa et al., 2016). Third, since high self-esteem has been

associated with superior self-regulation and persistence (Bosson & Swann, 2009), students high in self-esteem experienced higher student success and academic performance than students low in self-esteem (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2018). Conversely, low self-esteem has been associated with several detrimental effects. First, causal relationships have been found with negative life outcomes such as suicide and antisocial behavior. This was especially true for adolescents, whose behavioral and mental health problems included substance abuse, early sexual activity, and eating problems (Nguyen et al., 2019, Park & Yang, 2017). Second, low self-esteem individuals tend to have worse economic prospects than high self-esteem individuals (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Third, low self-esteem has been linked to depression and, in general, poorer mental health (Steiger et al., 2014, Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

To understand the underlying mechanisms of these considerable effects three arguments seem to be most relevant. First, self-esteem might reflect psychological mechanisms evolved as a tool to help humans navigate their social world (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001). According to this perspective, self-esteem provides valuable information about, for instance, one's dominance status, prestige, social inclusion or exclusion, and mate value (Bosson & Swann, 2009). If one fails to achieve their goals in these social domains, low self-esteem and negative self-assessment act as motivation to either renew efforts toward goal achievement or to invest energies elsewhere (Bosson & Swann, 2009). Second, self-esteem may have a protective function, since it might constitute a buffer against the existential anxiety caused by the awareness of one's mortality and the unknowns that accompany it (Bosson & Swann, 2009). High self-esteem might indicate that the standards associated with one's role within a larger, human-made system of meaning are met. Conversely, low self-esteem might contribute to individuals' vulnerability to their firmly held fear of death (Bosson & Swann, 2009). Third, higher self-esteem correlates with smaller proportions of negative self-views, which tend to be relatively less complex and differentiated (Hoyle, 2006), and

with smaller discrepancies between actual and ideal self-beliefs(Higgins, 1987). Because of their heightened coping mechanisms and the confidence in their positive attributes, individuals high in self-esteem are less affected by negative self-relevant information and their distressing effects (such as negative feedback, rejection, or failure) (Bosson & Swann, 2009).

Taken together, self-esteem is a crucial element in understanding individuals' well-being and success. Nevertheless little is known about its role in the context of goal pursuit. More specifically, does self-esteem influence the relationship between goal focus and successful goal pursuit? Would individuals low in self-esteem benefit more from a process focus or from an outcome focus when striving to achieve their goals? Three arguments are relevant to answer these questions. First, low self-esteem individuals are more risk-averse when making decisions, most likely because they have relatively low expectations of success (Wray & Stone, 2005) and are motivated to avoid feelings of regret should a risky decision yield negative consequences (Josephs et. al,1992). Therefore, one could argue that the distant and more abstract outcome might make them feel less overwhelmed or pressured by the possibility of failure and consequently, facilitate their goal pursuit. Second, it is plausible that pursuing small rather than big goals might be beneficial for low self-esteem individuals since achieving them might boost their confidence in their capabilities and motivate them to achieve bigger goals in the future. Because an outcome focus has been shown to be effective when pursuing smaller goals (Pham & Taylor, 1999), then low self-esteem individuals might benefit more from focusing on the outcome. Third, as low self-esteem individuals tend to perceive more discrepancy between their actual and desired state, an outcome focus might result more beneficial since it provides standards for goal achievement by comparing these two states. In addition, an outcome focus can motivate them to engage in outcome-relevant actions (Oettingen & Wadden, 1991). Based on these arguments, it was hypothesized in the present

study, that for individuals with lower levels of self-esteem, an outcome focus will result in

higher chances of successfully pursuing their goal, whereas, for individuals with higher levels

of self-esteem, a process focus will result in higher chances of successfully pursuing their

goal.

The present research

The aim of the present research was to shed light on the effects of goal focus on

successful goal pursuit, and the extent to which this relationship is moderated by self-esteem.

To investigate this, participants have agreed to fill in a two-part questionnaire whereby they

provided information about a self-generated goal they intended to pursue and their general

attitudes towards it. The second part was administered five days after the first part, in order to

give participants time to work on their goals.

The present study is novel in three key ways. Firstly, at the present day, very little

literature about the effects and implications of self-esteem in the context of goal focus and

successful goal pursuit exists. Therefore this study was conducted in the hope of contributing

in a meaningful way to this limited body of knowledge. Secondly, the setting in which this

study took part was high in realism, since participants did not work on their goals in an

artificial laboratory setting. Thirdly, contrary to other studies where all participants were

instructed to pursue the same goal, participants in the present study pursued self-chosen goals,

that is, they were allowed full autonomy and creativity to generate their own goals. Finally,

conclusions drawn from the current study may result beneficial when developing

interventions aimed at helping individuals, since improving one's self-esteem could have

benefits for successful goal pursuit.

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 267 cases were present in the dataset. Those who did not comply with the study requirements were removed from the sample in four steps. In a first step, 202 participants were removed due to their results being incomplete. 'Incomplete' was defined as not filling out the survey at least until the seriousness check, the final question of the second part of the survey. Among these, 141 did not finish part one. In addition, many of them did not fill out any questions. In fact, subjects only opened the survey and decided to not partake or returned to it later, therefore adding a new case to the sample size. Others filled in a few questions and then abandoned the survey. Out of the 126 participants who did fill out part one, 5 forgot to submit their responses. As a result, they never received the e-mail to part two. Of the remaining 121 participants, 65 filled out part two until the final question, the seriousness check.

In a second step, 1 participant was removed since they did not take part in the study seriously. In a third step, it was checked whether any participants did not write down a goal or whether they wrote a nonsensical goal. None of the participants were removed. In a fourth step, 4 participants were removed. Two did not write their goal in the second part of the survey, making it impossible to check whether they pursued the same goal indicated in part one. Two participants reported switching goals.

The final sample consisted of 60 participants (35 females, 24 males, and one not wishing to share their gender) whose ages ranged from 17 to 66 years old ($M = 31.58$, $SD = 14.62$). They were first-year students at the University of Groningen who participated in exchange for course credits, individuals from the researchers' social environment, and individuals who were recruited through an online poll. In this latter case, the social media Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp were used.

A between-subjects design was adopted where goal focus was the only independent variable. Participants were randomly assigned to either a process focus or an outcome focus

condition. The dependent variable was successful goal pursuit and the moderator was self-esteem. The current study was part of a bigger project where several additional variables were included. These will not be discussed here. For a detailed list of all the variables measured, please see Table 1 in the Appendix.

Materials and Procedure

For the assessment of this study, the online platform "Qualtrics" was used. Participants completed a two-part questionnaire. In the first part, they were asked to provide their informed consent before proceeding with the survey.

Self-esteem

To assess the moderator self-esteem, Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale was used. A total of ten items were included in the questionnaire (α =.81) and examples of these are 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself', and 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of'. A 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* was used to record participants' answers. Additionally, new versions of the reverse coded items from Rosenberg's self-esteem scale were computed. Finally, all ten items were averaged to provide an index of self-esteem.

Goal recall task

Next, to assess the independent variable goal focus, a goal recall task was administered. Participants were asked to choose a goal on which they would actively work for the next five days. As general guidelines, the goal could have been big or small, new or something participants were currently working on, and something that they have not been working on for longer than three months. This latter guideline was included to avoid the possibility that some meaningful progress had been made by participants by means of different strategies or different focus than the one we were interested in. This, in turn, would have undermined the effectiveness of the manipulation. Finally, participants were asked to clearly describe their goals.

Goal focus manipulation

Next, to manipulate goal focus, participants were randomly assigned to a process focus or to an outcome focus condition. The manipulation consisted of three parts, namely an inspirational quote, a brief description of the benefits of the relevant focus, and questions aimed at triggering the relevant focus.

In the first part, the quote 'A goal without a plan is just a wish' was presented in the process focus condition while the quote 'Begin with the end in mind' was presented in the outcome focus condition. These quotes had the purpose of priming participants to think about the steps they needed to take to achieve their goal (therefore, to think about the process) and to think about their desired goal (therefore, to think about the outcome), respectively.

In the second part, the information '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' was presented in the process focus condition while the information 'Current research has shown that, when pursuing a goal, *focusing on the desired outcome* is a very effective approach to achieve one's goal' was presented in the outcome focus condition. Presenting evidence about the benefits of either focus had the aim of strengthening participants' confidence in its effectiveness, therefore, motivating them to adopt the focus assigned to them. Furthermore, participants in the process focus condition were asked to visualize themselves *working on the tasks* they needed to undertake to pursue their goal while those in the outcome focus condition were asked to visualize themselves *achieving* their goal. The visualization of the task was considered an important element of the manipulation since mental imaging has been shown to be a very beneficial tool for performance. In addition, referring to the other focus in each condition such as comparing the two focuses was avoided. Providing too much information was undesirable since participants could very easily use the

internet to search for the topic of the survey. Learning that the focus they were assigned to was not the most effective among the two foci might have been demotivating for participants.

In the third part, three questions aimed at triggering the relevant focus were presented. In the process focus condition, the questions involved describing three ways in which participants could work on their goal right now, how working on the three steps they have mentioned will help them to pursue/achieve their goal, and how they would feel while working on the steps they need to take to pursue their goal. In the outcome focus condition, the questions involved describing what their desired outcome would look like, how thinking about the outcome will help them to pursue their goal, and how they would feel when achieving their desired outcome. Implementing such questions had the aim of triggering in participants the relevant focus in each condition. As the last step, participants in the process focus condition were reminded to focus on the tasks they needed to do to achieve their goal as they were working on it for the next five days since this was proven to help them in their goal pursuit. On the other hand, participants in the outcome focus condition were reminded to focus on their desired outcome as they were working on their goal for the next five days since this was proven to help them in their goal pursuit. This step was the last reminder about the goal of the study and what participants were expected to do during the five days of the study.

Successful goal pursuit

Two days after completing the first part, an e-mail reminder was sent to thank participants for their input and to remind them about the second part of the study. This latter was administered five days after completing the first part. Participants received an e-mail containing a link to a second Qualtrics survey, where the dependent variable successful goal pursuit was assessed. Two newly created items were used, namely 'to what extent do you think you successfully pursued your goal over the past five days?' for the outcome focus condition and 'to what extent did you make progress towards your goal over the past five

days?' for the process focus condition (α =.87). Both questions were assessed on a 7-point

Likert scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*.

Manipulation check

Next, a manipulation check was administered to assess the effectiveness of the

manipulation. Participants answered to what extent they had been focusing on the process

versus the outcome over the past five days on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *on the process*,

4 = *on the process and outcome equally*, 7 = *on the outcome*. In addition, they were asked

'throughout the study, did you stick to the same goal' where the possible answers were *yes* or

no and finally, they had to state their initial goal and, in case the goal changed, to state both

and then indicate the initial and the new goal.

In the next step, participants were asked whether they took part seriously in the

questionnaire through a seriousness check. The possible answers were 'Yes, I have taken part

seriously' and 'No, I have not taken part seriously, please remove my answers'. Lastly, the

debrief was presented.

Results

To conduct the analysis, the software SPSS and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013)

were used. Before proceeding, all the assumptions were thoroughly checked. Regarding

normality, the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the data departed from normality, W =.94, p

=.006. However, both the values of skewness (.018) and kurtosis (-1.11) indicated a mild

departure, since they were comprised between the values -2 to +2. With this in mind, we

proceeded as planned with our analysis.

Manipulation check

To test whether the manipulation worked as intended, a univariate Analysis of

Variance (ANOVA) was run with 'goal focus' as the independent variable and the

'manipulation check' (where participants indicated to what extent they had focused on the

process versus the outcome during their goal pursuit) as the dependent variable. As expected, participants in the outcome focus condition scored higher on the manipulation check (M = 4.42, SD = 1.82) than participants in the process focus condition (M = 3.63, SD = 1.84) and the difference between the two conditions was considerable. Nevertheless, these results were only marginally significant, $F(1,58)$ = 2.80, p =.10, ηp^2 =.046. This outcome might be due to the relatively small sample size. Because this effect was not significant, these results need to be interpreted with caution.

Hypothesis test

The hypothesis that for low self-esteem individuals, an outcome focus will result in higher chances of successfully pursuing their goal, whereas, for high self-esteem individuals, a process focus will result in higher chances of successfully pursuing their goal was tested. A moderator analysis was run where goal focus was set as the independent variable, successful goal pursuit as the dependent variable, and self-esteem as the moderator. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no significant interaction effect, $t(59)$ = -.40, p =.69. Thus, there was no evidence to suggest that self-esteem moderated the relationship between goal focus and successful goal pursuit. Regarding the manipulation, while the mean of participants in the outcome focus condition was slightly higher (M = 4.06, SE =.25) than the mean of participants in the process focus condition *(M = 3.96, SE =.28)*, the effect was not significant, $t(59)$ =.16, p =.87. Finally, regarding the moderator self-esteem, no significant main effect was found, $t(59)$= -.87, p =.39.

Explorative test

Since the manipulation did not work as intended, an exploratory analysis was conducted. Here, the manipulation check was set as the independent variable, successful goal pursuit as the dependent variable, and self-esteem as the moderator. The goal was to test whether the focus participants reported using during the study (the manipulation check),

predicted the extent to which they successfully pursued their goals. This can be a very informative alternative to the main analysis, nevertheless, caution is needed when interpreting the results as the manipulation check variable was measured rather than manipulated.

Contrary to the hypothesis, no significant interaction effect was present, $t(59) = -.67$, $p =.51$. Thus, in line with the results of the main analysis, there was no evidence to suggest that self-esteem moderated the relationship between the manipulation check and successful goal pursuit. Surprisingly, a marginally significant effect was found for the manipulation check $t(59)= 1.70$, $p =.09$. In other words, the more participants reported adopting an outcome (versus a process) focus, the more successful they indicated they were in pursuing their goal. Finally, regarding the moderator self-esteem, no significant main effect was found, $t(59) = -.89$, $p =.37$.

Discussion

The present research sought to explore what type of goal focus (process versus outcome) is most beneficial for successful goal pursuit based on one's self-esteem. Specifically, it was argued that for individuals with low levels of self-esteem, an outcome focus would result in higher chances of successfully pursuing their goal whereas, for individuals with high levels of self-esteem, a process focus would result in higher chances of successfully pursuing their goal. Contrary to expectations, no significant effects were found for the moderator hypothesis in both the main analysis and the exploratory analysis. The only marginally significant finding found in both analyses was a surprising main effect of goal focus on successful goal pursuit in the exploratory analysis.

The fact that a moderating effect of self-esteem was not found is surprising, given the existence of literature documenting strong correlations between self-esteem and factors that facilitate successful goal pursuit, such as self-regulation, goal persistence, decisiveness, and

risk-taking (Bosson & Swann, 2009). Such a conclusion is not in line with the hypothesis of this study therefore, both theoretical and methodological explanations must be explored.

Theoretical explanations

Three theoretical explanations seem to be relevant. First, after inspecting participants' reported goals, only a couple of them seem to directly relate to one's social environment. Examples of these are 'I want to do what I want and not what other people want from me' and 'talk about relationship problems with my partner'. Since it was argued that self-esteem might help humans navigate their social world by providing information about their social status (Bosson & Swann, 2009), it seems plausible that a failure in detecting an effect of self-esteem was simply because of the nature of the goals reported.

Second, the surprising main effect of goal focus on successful goal pursuit indicated that the more people focused on the outcome, the more they reported successful goal pursuit. This finding is in contrast with existing literature supporting the adaptiveness of a process focus and therefore might suggest that the theory on which the hypothesis of this study was based, might not be true or complete or that the theory was not rooted in complete literature.

Third, the hypothesis investigated in this study might be rooted in incomplete literature or might be wrong. It was speculated that individuals low in self-esteem would benefit more from an outcome focus for their goal pursuit, whereas individuals high in self-esteem would benefit more from a process focus for their goal pursuit. However, the very opposite might hold. In instances where the goal pursuit is demanding with respect to self-regulation, or difficult, then focusing on the process is beneficial because it provides clear guidelines. Since higher self-esteem is associated with superior self-regulation during goal pursuit, it seems plausible that individuals low in self-esteem could benefit more from a process focus, as they exert less effort, struggle with persistence in the face of failure (Meškauskienė, 2013), and more likely struggle with self-regulation. On the other hand, since

high self-esteem individuals were found to persist less than low self-esteem individuals after repeated failures (Di Paula & Campbell, 2002), an outcome focus could benefit them more since it could act as a motivational boost, therefore increasing their persistence (Kaftan & Freund, 2018). Some caution is needed when considering this latter explanation. Since no significant effect was found, it can not fully explain the findings of this study. Further studies that take into account these potential theoretical reasons are needed to investigate their likelihood.

Methodological explanations

When considering the methodological approach of this study, two explanations seem relevant to explain the lack of results. First, it might be possible that participants thought about a small rather than a big goal due to the instructions of the study. After inspecting the data, a significant portion of participants appeared to have generated small goals (e.g. 'making time to see friends', 'walking more outside', and 'eating fewer sweets'). Self-esteem has been associated with self-regulation during goal pursuit, such that higher levels of self-esteem provide higher levels of self-regulation. In turn, more self-regulation is required to pursue bigger, long-term goals, while less self-regulation is required to achieve smaller, short-term goals (Bosson & Swann, 2009). Therefore, it seems plausible that a moderating effect was not detected because self-esteem might play a critical role for goal pursuit only in limited circumstances, such as when it comes to bigger, more difficult goals. Second, it is possible that the manipulation did not completely behave as it was intended, despite observing a big enough difference between the two conditions. Participants had to pursue self-chosen goals, that is, they were free to generate their own goals in line with the provided guidelines. This was done to avoid leading participants and allow them full autonomy and creativity when selecting their goal. Previous studies provided participants with a single, identical goal to focus on (Freund & Hennecke, 2012). It is plausible that these goals, which seemed to be

more specific and concrete, might have influenced the type of focus participants adopted.
Because providing specific instructions regarding every individual goal was not possible in
this study, it is plausible that (some) participants did not fully adopt the focus they were
assigned to, or that they adopted both foci rather than one. As a consequence, it was not
possible to detect a potential moderating effect of self-esteem.

Manipulation check effect

Given the extensive literature showing the benefits of a process focus (Freund et al.,
2010, Pham & Taylor, 1999), the finding that the more participants focused on the outcome,
the more they reported successful goal pursuit, is remarkable. Since a moderator hypothesis
between goal focus, successful goal pursuit, and self-esteem was tested, no predictions about
a possible main effect of goal focus were made. With this in mind, two possibilities seem
most relevant to explain such results. First, many participants seem to have chosen a relatively
small goal due to the set-up of this study. Supporting evidence has been found for the
beneficial effects of an outcome focus when the goal at hand is perceived to be small (Pham
& Taylor, 1999). It seems plausible then, that the selection of small goals might explain these
results. Second, presumably, the three-month guideline concerning the goal participants could
choose was still enough time for (some of) them to actively work on it, therefore, making
some meaningful progress. Previous research has argued that when working on a goal for a
longer time, an outcome focus might result more beneficial by providing a final boost of
motivation (Freund et al., 2012). These results could therefore explain why the more
participants focused on the outcome, the more they reported successful goal pursuit.

Since no significant results were found in the current study, two potential theoretical
implications merit to be explored. First, the results could suggest that self-esteem might have
no moderating role in the relationship between goal focus and successful goal pursuit, or at
least not in all contexts. This might point to the fact that the theory behind the hypothesis of

this study might be incomplete or incorrect. Second, the surprising finding that the more individuals focused on the outcome, the more they reported successful goal pursuit, seems to cast some doubts on the existing literature advocating for the higher adaptiveness of a process focus. Is it possible that previous research has failed to detect the potential impact an outcome focus might have for goal pursuit? Further studies are clearly needed to address such potential implications.

Limitations

There are four limitations to this study that should be noted. First, due to the short time frame (approximately two weeks) available for data collection, the final sample size was relatively low. Even though a sizeable difference in reported goal focus between the means of the two conditions was found, this difference was not significant. To achieve such a conclusion, a larger sample size is needed. Future studies could therefore increase their sample size by allowing more time for data collection. Second, since a convenience sample was used, the generalization of the results to the bigger population might result difficult. The use of a simple random sample might be a solution that future research could implement. Third, because participants' available resources (e.g. time and motivation) were taken into account, the 5 days time frame available to work on their goals was relatively short. In addition, compared to a laboratory setting where participants would have provided less genuine reactions, this study is high in realism. Because of the short time frame, investigating potential changes of the effect of goal focus on successful goal pursuit over time was not possible. Long-term studies are needed to achieve such a purpose. Future research could implement a longer time frame for their investigations where potential effects of goal focus over time can be addressed. Finally, the independent variable manipulation check used in the exploratory analysis indicated to what extent participants focused on the process or outcome during their goal pursuit, regardless of the condition they were assigned to. Consequently, this

was a measured, rather than a manipulated variable. Caution should be applied when interpreting these results since no direct causal claims can be made on their basis. The exploratory analysis remains nevertheless a very informative alternative that should be taken into consideration.

Future Research and Implications

Future research might be aimed towards two valuable directions. First, the findings in the current study suggest that future attention should be drawn on the types of goals for which an outcome focus (rather than a process focus) could be more beneficial. For instance, simple and abstract goals might profit from the more distal and abstract outcome focus(Freund & Hennecke, 2012). Mastery goals might profit as well, given that they generate individual responses such as enhanced task enjoyment, persistence in the face of failure, and a positive learning attitude (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). On the other hand, complex and concrete goals might benefit from the more proximal and concrete process focus (Freund & Hennecke, 2012). Performance goals, which generate responses such as decreased task enjoyment, effort withdrawal in the face of failure, and attribution of failure to lack of ability (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), might profit as well. Second, it would be interesting to explore which focus may be more advantageous for successful goal pursuit based on individual differences, self-esteem being one example. Past work has mainly focused on the situational aspects of goal pursuit such as the phase of goal pursuit (Kaftan & Freund, 2018), perceived task difficulty (Emmons, 1996), or mastery of the task (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999). Therefore, individual differences such as self-efficacy, locus of control (internal versus external), and self-regulation, might be profitable factors to further investigate.

Moreover, some practical implications might be worth exploring. First, no conclusions can be drawn on the role of self-esteem in the context of goal focus and successful goal pursuit based on this study. However, given that self-esteem was linked to factors that

facilitate successful goal pursuit, such as decisiveness, self-regulation, and goal persistence (Bosson & Swann, 2009), one might speculate that improving self-esteem might yield beneficial effects on an individual's ability to pursue important life goals. If a relationship between self-esteem and goal focus was to be found, then interventions aimed at increasing self-esteem could benefit from this knowledge by implementing goal focus in their strategies. Further studies are needed to investigate these hypotheses. Secondly, conclusions from this study may have applied implications for how individuals may enhance the probability of achieving their desired goals in everyday life and for developing interventions aimed at changing one's behavior. In addition to employing mental contrasting (Kaftan & Freund, 2018), implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), and increasing goal commitment (Locke & Latham, 1990), it seems that adopting an outcome focus could facilitate goal pursuit based on the type of goal that was chosen. Consistent with past work, results from this study seem to suggest that if individuals want to achieve small, short-term goals, adopting an outcome focus might be more beneficial than a process focus. More studies are needed to investigate further goals that could benefit from this focus.

Conclusion

This study contributes to past work on the role of goal focus in the context of pursuing and achieving goals by accounting for the potential role of self-esteem and, more broadly, individual differences. Contrary to the hypothesis, no evidence for a moderating effect was found, therefore no conclusions can be drawn on the role of self-esteem in the context of goal focus and successful goal pursuit based on this study. In addition, a marginally significant main effect of goal focus was found, where the more participants focused on the outcome, the more they reported successful goal pursuit. This remarkable finding is in contrast with the broader literature supporting the adaptiveness of a process focus over an outcome focus (Freund et al., 2010; Kaftan & Freund, 2018). These results need to be interpreted with

caution as this study should be considered exploratory. However, they might hold some

important implications for programs targeting behavioral change. Beyond adopting

implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), mental contrasting (Kaftan & Freund, 2018),

and increasing goal commitment (Locke & Latham, 1990), it seems that identifying the type

of goal at hand might have a big impact on the best focus to adopt during goal pursuit.

Consistent with past work, results from this study seem to suggest that if individuals want to

achieve small, short-term goals, adopting an outcome focus might be more beneficial than a

process focus. Further studies are needed to identify stronger evidence in support of these

claims.

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Appendix

Table 1

Overview of the variables measured in this study. First the Independent Variables, Second the Dependent Variables and Third, the Moderators.

IV	DV	Moderators
Successful Goal Pursuit	Contentment with goal pursuit	Goal Difficulty
	Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation
		Intrinsic Motivation
		Self-efficacy
		Task Aversiveness