Qualitative Investigation of Constitutive and Instrumental Orientations to Personal Goals

Laura M. Cohen, B.A., G. Tyler Lefevor, B.S., Meghan B. Owenz, M.A.,
Samantha Lang, B.S.Ed., & Blaine J. Fowers, Ph.D.

Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, University of Miami

Abstract

A large literature investigates goal seeking and its relationships to affect, behavior, and well-being. The focus of this study is to understand the orientations individuals take to goal pursuit. Most goal pursuit studies ask participants to rate generic goals generated by researchers, which while empirically practical, may not be meaningful and relevant to participants. In contrast, this study employed participant-generated goals, qualitative methods, and grounded-theory analysis to explore how a goal is pursued, the meaning of a goal, and its place in the individual's network of goals. A purposive sample of 11 emerging adults was recruited due to their expected goal articulacy and interviewed twice over a 4-month period. The instrumental and constitutive orientation of participants' goals fit into five thematic categories.

Introduction

Research has documented a distinction in modes of goal pursuit that Aristotle proposed in his theory of eudaimonia (human flourishing). The most commonly known form of goal pursuit is an instrumental goal orientation has a means-end approach with the means selected for their efficiency, effectiveness, or cost. In contrast, a constitutive goal orientation means that one's actions are inseparable from the goal because the actions, by their very nature, constitute the goal. Many goals can be pursued either instrumentally or constitutively. For example, knowledge can be a means to other ends, as in engineering, or it can be an end in itself, as in simply desiring to understand something. Because constitutive goals and actions are inseparable, the actions themselves are meaningful; suggesting that individuals will tend to experience greater meaning when seeking constitutive goals than instrumental goals. In addition, constitutively pursued goals will tend to have a hierarchically superior position in an individual's network of goals.

The instrumental/constitutive goals distinction is best studied with qualitative methods because the research question focuses on individuals' interpretations of their goal pursuit as opposed to ratings of goal orientation endorsement. However, the majority of goal pursuit research depends on quantitative participant rankings of researcher-provided goals. These methods provide little information about participants' actual goals. A small body of researchers has adopted a more ecologically valid method of goal pursuit research in which participants generate their own (idiographic) goals. In order to obtain an information rich sample, we purposively selected highly goal-oriented individuals (Teach for America corps members) in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (focused on exploring and implementing life goals). We employed grounded theory analysis to develop a theory of goal orientation.

Goal Orientation Structure

Research Questions

What relationships between means and ends do individuals describe in their goal pursuit?

What are the relationships among the goals a participant has?

What form (if any) of goal hierarchy do individuals have?

Method

Participants: We recruited 11 individuals (8 women and 3 men, average age 23.8) from Teach for America corps members in a large, ethnically diverse southeastern city.

Data Collection:
Time 1: Participants provided 5 important goals and the key actions they use to attain them. We conducted 1.5-2 hour semi-structured interviews focused on the content of participants' goals and the relationship between the goals and goal pursuit activities.
Time 2 (3-4 months after Time 1): We conducted 1.5-2 hour follow-up interviews to assess goal change, goal progress, and possible shifts in participants' goal orientations.

Analysis:
We employed widely recognized credibility enhancement methods: the method of constant comparison, prolonged engagement (follow-up interviews), persistent observation (in-depth interviews), and the utilization of several trained researchers. At least 2 researchers were involved in all open and axial coding procedures, the basis of the development of a grounded theory account of goal orientation. Coders categorized segments of interview data independently, and then came to a consensus code assignment through group discussion. The theory of goal orientation emerged as the most naturally thematic description of the identified codes. Idiosyncratic and low incidence codes were eliminated or subsumed into other codes.

Results and Discussion

Participants varied in the ease and clarity with which they discussed the content and process of their goal pursuit. Five thematic categories emerged from the data: Instrumental/Constitutive Distinction, Meaningfulness, Goal Hierarchy, Fusion and Transformation, and Confusion and Struggle.
Thematic category 1: Instrumental/Constitutive Distinction (626 utterances) included the categories of goal and action types.
Thematic category 2: Meaningfulness (386) was divided into the categories of meaning versus money, personal growth, and personal expression.
Thematic category 3: Goal Hierarchy (97) based on the categories of instrumental or constitutive relationships among goals, stepwise progression in goal pursuit, hierarchy of importance and meaning, and the process of one goal facilitating another goal.
Thematic category 4: Fusion and Transformation (42) consisted of three categories: the fusion of instrumental and constitutive goals, transformation of instrumental to constitutive goals, and instrumentalization leading to a loss of meaning.
Thematic category 5: Confusion and Struggle (211) includes categories of goal orientation language confusion, discomfort with instrumental goals, and instrumental/constitutive confusion.
Several conclusions follow from the results. First, respondents' spontaneous natural language expressed the instrumental/constitutive goal distinction, which suggests that the goal orientation distinction was easily accessible and meaningful to them. Participants varied considerably in their clarity about the distinction and their comfort with their goal orientations, ranging from some participants having complete clarity and comfort to others whose inability to articulate their goal orientation was accompanied by distress and discomfort. Second, the concepts related to the goal orientation distinction were complex and dynamic, meaning that they cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy, a very important result that necessitates greater nuance and complexity in eudaimonic theory. Third, some goals were inherently constitutive (e.g., learning for its own sake), some inherently instrumental (earning money), and some goals that could only be distinguished by exploring the participants' interpretation of goal pursuit (e.g., graduate college). Fourth, although the instrumental/constitutive distinction was introduced by Aristotle in the 4th Century B.C.E., it remains central to goal pursuit to this day, facilitating the efficient pursuit of infrastructural goals, the meaningful pursuit of inherently valuable goals, personal development, and a complete, flourishing life.