

Qualitative Exploration of Goal Importance among Emerging Adults



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Abstract

Interest has quickened in the study of goal pursuit and its relationships to affect, behavior, and well-being. In contrast to goal research utilizing researcher provided goals, this study employed participant-generated goals and qualitative methods to explore a richer understanding of what made participants' goals choiceworthy. A purposive sample of 11 emerging adults was recruited due to their expected goal articulacy and interviewed twice over a 4-month period. Grounded-theory analysis produced a theoretical structure of goal importance. The choiceworthiness of participants' goals fit into three main categories: Hedonic Interests, Eudaimonic Interests and Goal Structure.

Introduction

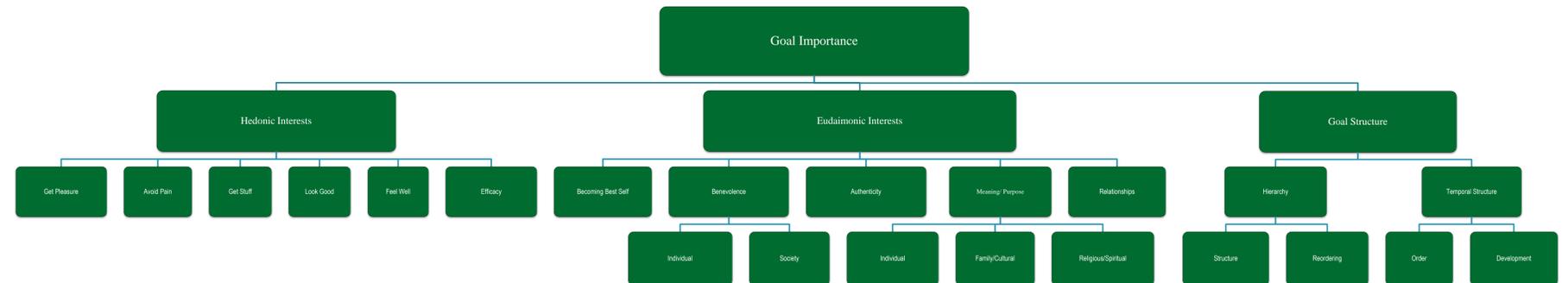
Goal pursuit research generally relies on participant ratings of researcher-provided goals, providing information on participants' endorsements of pre-packaged goals, but little information about their actual goals. Some goal researchers use participant-generated goals as a more ecologically valid method than pre-packaged researcher-provided goals. We extended this with an in-depth exploration of the reasons individuals found their goals worthwhile rather than being limited to numerical ratings such as goal importance or commitment. We purposively selected emerging adults (developmentally concerned with exploring and implementing life goals) employed by Teach for America (an organization that hires goal oriented individuals) as an information rich sample. We used grounded theory analysis to capitalize on this information richness to develop a theory of goal importance. We were also interested in the prominence of goal rationales that are particularly relevant for emerging adulthood.

Research Questions

What are the reasons that individuals consider their goals important?
How will developmentally appropriate goal topics of emerging adulthood be described by participants?

Acknowledgement: This study was supported by a grant from the University of Miami Ethics Program and the Arsht Ethics Initiatives.

Goal Structure



Method

Participants:

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

Data Collection:

Time 1 (Baseline): We collected quantitative data on participants' goals, goal orientations and individual well-being, followed by a 1.5-2 hour baseline interview, focusing on an in-depth understanding of participants goals, the reasons why the goals were worthwhile, and the respondent's hierarchy of goal importance.

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 reasons for goal importance and hierarchy.

Analysis:

We employed widely recognized methods to enhance the credibility of the study: the method of constant comparison (in-depth and recursive coding), persistent observation (in-depth interviews), prolonged engagement (follow-up interviews), and including multiple researchers. At least 2 researchers were involved in coding procedures (open and axial), from which we developed a grounded theory account of goal importance. Coders independently categorized segments of interview data and then came together to discuss and assign codes. The theory of goal importance emerged as the most natural and parsimonious description of the identified codes. Idiosyncratic and low incidence codes were eliminated or subsumed in other codes.

Results and Discussion

Easily and with great depth, participants discussed why their goals were important. Three main categories emerged: Hedonic Interests (seeking pleasant and avoiding painful outcomes), Eudaimonic Interests (meaning, growth, and benevolence processes), and Structure (hierarchy and temporal structures).

Thematic category 1: Hedonic Interests included these categories: Get Pleasure (enjoyment, comfort), Avoid Pain (regret, stress), Get Stuff (financial, degree attainment), Look Good (appearance, qualifications), Feel Well (physical health), and Efficacy (instrumental success).

Thematic category 2: Eudaimonic Interests had these categories: Becoming Best Self (cultivating good personal qualities), Authenticity (congruence with identity), Benevolence (benefitting specific others and society), Meaning & Purpose (import derived from individual, familial, cultural, and spiritual sources), and Relationships (relationship maintenance).

Thematic category 3: Goal Structure included the categories of Goal Hierarchy (superordinate structure and hierarchy reordering) and Temporality (temporal ordering and developmental staging).

Participants readily provided rich, thematically intelligible rationales for goal importance, suggesting that a great deal of information about goal pursuit has been neglected in the narrowly quantitative literature. Hedonic and Eudaimonic Interests were somewhat independent, but Hedonic Interests were often cited as infrastructure for Eudaimonic Interests (e.g., reducing debt to facilitate public service work). Participants varied in the clarity and organization of their goals from being very articulate about them to exploring the content and structure of their goals through the interview process. Three tasks associated with emerging adulthood (exploring careers, exploring relationships, and differentiating from the family of origin) were spread throughout the responses. We conclude that the reasons for goal choice and pursuit are at least as informative as quantitative indices of goal pursuit (i.e., goal importance and commitment).