

The Goal Construct in Psychology

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The term *goal* has long been utilized in scientific accounts of motivation. The theoretical and empirical utility of goals has been richly documented over the years, and it is difficult to envision a complete account of motivation that does not take into consideration, implicitly or explicitly, the goal-directed nature of behavior. In fact, many theorists incorporate the goal construct into their very definition of *motivation* per se. Mitchell (1982), for example, defines *motivation* as “those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed” (p. 81). Likewise, Phares and Chaplin (1997) define it as “the forces within us that activate our behavior and direct it toward one goal rather than another” (p. 434; see also Beck, 1978; Ford, 1992; Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Valenstein, 1973; Young, 1961).

Given the centrality of the goal construct in motivational science, and the widespread use of different types of goal constructs in contem-

porary psychology, it is surprising how little the precise nature of the term *goal* has been explicitly discussed in the literature. Goals typically occupy the “ground” rather than the “figure” in motivational analyses of behavior (Kruglanski, 1996), as researchers and theorists commonly neglect to offer a definition of *goal*, even as they use it extensively throughout their work. It seems that scholars take as a given that they and their readers share the same understanding of what is meant by the term *goal*. Unfortunately, this presumption cannot possibly be accurate, because *goal* takes on many different meanings in everyday language and in the language of psychology, and researchers and theorists use the term in many different ways. Simply put, consensual agreement on the definition and use of *goal* in the psychological literature does not exist.

In this chapter we overview some of the different ways that the term *goal* is defined and conceptualized in the contemporary literature,

and identify problems that this variability poses for researchers and theorists. We then proceed to examine the roots of the term in common language, and offer a history of the development of the goal construct in psychological thought. We conclude by offering a definition and conceptualization of *goal*, based on our linguistic and historical analyses. Until we offer our precise definition, we use the term *goal* in the vague, general sense of "something involved in the direction of behavior."

THE GOAL CONSTRUCT IN THE CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

In 1985, Heckhausen and Kuhl described *goal* as a "notoriously ill-defined term" (p. 137), and little progress has been made in this regard over the past two decades. As noted above, a technical definition of *goal* is often not provided in theoretical and empirical work, and the definitions that are provided vary considerably. Some definitions include mention of an internal representation (Caprara & Cervone, 2000); others do not (Reeve, 1992). Some definitions include a focus on the future (e.g., Kruglanski, 1996); others do not (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Some definitions include reference to an appetitive or desired possibility (Locke & Latham, 1990); others do not (e.g., Winter, 1996). Some definitions include reference to movement as well as an object that is the focal point of the movement (e.g., Ferguson, 2000); others do not (Bandura, 1986). Some definitions include mention of commitment (e.g., Deckers, 2001); others do not (e.g., Geen, 1995). Some definitions include a reference to affect (e.g., Lewis, 1990); others do not (e.g., Ford, 1992). Finally, some definitions are quite precise and specific, referring to several of the aforementioned characteristics (e.g., Pervin, 1983); others are quite vague and general (Maehr, 1989).

Researchers and theorists not only exhibit disagreement in their technical definitions of *goal*, but they also conceptualize goals in many different ways. Some equate goals with standards for behavior (Bandura, 1986); others do not (Boldero & Francis, 2002). Some equate goals with wishes or fantasies (Ford, 1992); others do not (Gollwitzer, 1990). Some collapse goals together with needs, motives, or drives (Pervin, 1983); others do not (Brunstein,

Schultheiss, & Graessman, 1998). Some contend that goals energize as well as direct behavior (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996); others do not (Kuhl, 2000). Some apply *goal* to biological set points (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996) and to vegetative acts such as a heartbeat or a flower turning toward the sun (Binswanger, 1986); others do not. Some view essentially all behavior as goal-directed (Beach, 1985); others do not (e.g., Ferguson, 2000).

Clearly, there is a great deal of disagreement in the literature as to how the term *goal* is best defined and conceptualized. We think that this lack of definitional and conceptual clarity has several deleterious implications for theoretical and empirical development.

First, this lack of clarity makes it difficult to establish the core aspect(s) of the goal construct, which hinders progress in empirical research. Construct operationalization is inherently grounded in construct definition; thus ambiguity with regard to the core definitional feature(s) of *goal* will produce variability in the way that goals are operationalized in the research process. This operational variability inevitably leads to empirical variability, which produces results that are difficult to interpret, and a cumulative yield that lacks coherence and a clear "take-home message."

Second, this lack of clarity makes it difficult to establish the conceptual boundaries of the goal construct—what should and should not be included under the *goal* rubric. Problems loom in both directions. If goals are conceptualized in an extremely narrow fashion, their predictive and theoretical utility will not be fully exploited, and parsimony will be sacrificed as more constructs are utilized than are necessary to account for the phenomena under consideration. Conversely, if goals are conceptualized in an extremely broad fashion, there is a danger that the term *goal* will become so overextended that it loses any precise psychological meaning.

Third, this lack of clarity makes it difficult to determine the functional properties best attributed to the goal construct. Without a clear sense of the explanatory role of goals, it is impossible to know what additional constructs are needed to fully account for motivated behavior, and what relationship the goal construct has to other constructs that are delineated. One of two things tends to happen as a result: Either the goal construct becomes meshed with other motivational constructs such as needs or motives (thereby losing its dis-

tinct identity), or the goal construct becomes artificially isolated from other constructs (thereby yielding a fragmented or incomplete analysis of motivation).

Fourth, this lack of clarity limits cross-talk and cross-fertilization among different researchers and theorists working on the goal construct. If *goal* means different things in different disciplines or literatures, and even different things to different scholars within the same discipline or literature, there is little common ground for sharing ideas, empirical results, and applications. As such, many opportunities for facilitated progress and knowledge integration are missed.

The achievement goal approach to achievement motivation may be used to illustrate these points. Achievement goal theorists seek to account for motivated behavior in competence-relevant settings such as school, sports, and work. The achievement goal literature has been in place for over two decades, but a consensual definition of the goal construct has not yet emerged. Three distinct definitions may be identified: (1) the purpose or reason for behavior (Maehr, 1989), (2) a network or integrated pattern of variables that create an orientation toward behavior (Ames, 1992), and (3) the aim of behavior (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). As might be expected, the achievement goal manipulations and measures that are utilized in this literature vary considerably, depending on which of these definitions they are (explicitly or, often, implicitly) based on. The empirical yield is likewise variable, and this empirical inconsistency has undoubtedly contributed to several recent debates and controversies in the literature regarding the nature and implications of achievement goals (see Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002; Harwood, Hardy, & Swain, 2000; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Treasure, Duda, Hall, Roberts, & Ames, 2001). Furthermore, the functional role of the goal construct in the achievement goal approach is not clear. Some seem to view achievement goals as analogous to achievement motives and grant them energizational properties (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), whereas others characterize them as emerging (in part) from conceptually independent achievement motives and argue that they serve a directional role in achievement behavior (Elliot & Church, 1997). Finally, the achievement goal literature is quite fragmented across disciplines, as research efforts in social

personality and educational psychology proceed quite independently of those in sport and exercise psychology, and both of the aforementioned have little integrative contact with achievement goal work in industrial organizational psychology. Incorporation of ideas from other goal literatures (e.g., goal-setting theory—Locke & Latham, 1990; goal systems theory—Kruglanski et al., 2002) is very uncommon in achievement goal research; likewise, achievement goal ideas are rarely utilized by scholars working in other literatures or disciplines. Thus, despite the fact that the achievement goal literature has made important theoretical and empirical contributions in the area of achievement motivation, a lack of definitional and conceptual clarity has hampered progress in this literature, if not actually induced stagnation (Elliot, 2005). The specific travails of the achievement goal literature may be unique, but the general notion of encountering difficulty due to definitional and conceptual ambiguity surrounding the goal construct most certainly is not (see Geen, 1995; Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Weiss, 1925).

THE ROOTS OF THE WORD *GOAL* IN COMMON LANGUAGE

Given the absence of a clear definition and conceptualization of *goal* in the contemporary psychological literature, we turn to linguistic and historical sources of information for assistance. First, we examine the roots of the word *goal* in common language. Then, in the following section, we overview the development of the goal construct in psychological thought.

Scientific psychology in general, and the scientific study of motivation specifically, emerged in large part in German- and English-speaking countries. As such, to examine the linguistic roots of the word *goal*, it is necessary to examine the terms used for the goal construct in both the German and English languages. These terms are *Ziel* and *goal* in German and English respectively.

Ziel

The word *Ziel* initially appeared as *Zil* (also *Cil*) in Old High German around the year 800, and carried the meaning “boundary/limit,” “specific end,” or “destination” (*Deutsches*

Wörterbuch, 1992; *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*, 1989). *Zil* was uncommon in Old High German, but it became much more frequent during the Middle High German period between approximately 1000 and 1350. For example, the 13th-century poet Wolfram von Eschenbach used *Zil* regularly in his writings (e.g., “She was far above the *Zil* [limit] of desire,” “the *Zil* [end] of this adventure”) (see Grimm & Grimm, 1965, p. 1055). During the New High German period, *Zil* was lengthened to *Ziel*, and the two terms were used interchangeably. *Zil* and *Ziel* continued to be used with the meaning “end” (and related meanings) intact, but a new, figurative meaning—“what one is striving for”—was also added during this period (Grimm & Grimm, 1965). This figurative use of *Ziel* can be found in Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible, which appeared in the early to mid-1500s (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 1992).

Etymologically, *Ziel* emerged from the Germanic language Gothic. Specifically, scholars have traced the origin of *Ziel* back to the Gothic-runic word *tilarids*, which meant “striving toward the target” (Grimm & Grimm, 1965).

Goal

There have been many different renderings of the word *goal* in the English language, including *gol*, *gole*, and *goale*. The word first appeared in Middle English as *gol* in Shoreham’s *Poems* in 1315 and was used to denote “boundary or limit” (*Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, 1989). This is the only occurrence of this form of the word in English literature, and it did not appear again for over 200 years. In 1531, *gole* appeared in Elyot’s *The Boke Named the Governour*, and was used to denote “the terminal point of a race; any object (as a pillar, mound, etc.) by which this is marked; a winning post or the like” (*OED*, 1989, p. 632). This second definition of *goal* became common soon thereafter, appearing many times throughout the middle and late 1500s (and beyond). In the early 1600s, this second definition began to be used in a figurative sense to denote “the object to which effort or ambition is directed” (*OED*, 1989). The first occurrence of this figurative usage is in Shakespeare’s (1609/1964) *Pericles*: “Then Honour be but a Goale to my Will, This day Ile rise, or else adde ill to ill” (p. 21).

The etymology of the word *goal* is not altogether clear; the *OED* characterizes it as “difficult” and “insecure.” However, the available evidence suggests that the Middle English *gol* as “boundary or limit” came from the Old English *gál*, which meant “barrier or obstacle” (Barnhart, 1988). The semantic development from “barrier” to “boundary” is straightforward, as is the development from the literal “terminal point of a race” to the figurative “object to which effort or ambition is directed.” The development from “boundary” to “terminal point of a race” is less direct and is likely rooted in the Latin word *mēta*.

Mēta initially referred to the conical columns set in the ground at each end of the Roman Circus to mark the turning place in a race (Lewis & Short, 1879), and this reference was generalized to denote “a cone-shaped turning-post at either end of a race-track” (Glare, 1973). This denotation of a turning point or endpoint was generalized further over time, yielding a second definition of *mēta*: “boundary or limit” (Glare, 1973). Scholars have noted the similarities between the different meanings of *mēta* and the different meanings of *goal*, and have suggested that the semantic development from “boundary” to “terminal point of a race” for *goal* may have been patterned after the fact that *mēta* carried the meaning of “turning point” or “endpoint” as well as “boundary” (Lewis & Short, 1879).

In sum, in both German and English, the words *Zeil* and *goal* have literal and figurative usages that are deeply rooted in their respective languages. Both usages convey similar meanings in the two languages. The literal usage carries the meaning of a specific boundary or endpoint, whereas the figurative usage carries the meaning of something striven for that directs action.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOAL CONSTRUCT IN PSYCHOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Goal-relevant concepts and constructs have been present throughout the history of psychological thought. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) is often regarded as the first truly psychological thinker (Leahey, 1997; R. I. Watson, 1968), and his writings make clear reference to the directional nature of behavior. For Aristotle, behavior is always purposeful, and imagined end-states are viewed as having an important

influence on human action (Brett, 1912). In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, he wrote that “the origin of action . . . is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end” (Aristotle, n.d., p. 139). Aristotle used the work of a sculptor creating a statue to illustrate this notion of purpose and directedness. Standing before a block of marble, the sculptor has an idea of what is wanted at the end of the sculpting process. It is this imagined end-state that is thought to determine the way that the marble is chiseled as the sculptor produces the statue.

Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) is commonly viewed as the first scholar to advocate for a scientific psychology (Boring, 1957; Klein, 1970). Specifically, Herbart sought to establish a scientific analysis of the mechanics of mental representations, and in so doing he made use of dynamic explanations of behavior—including, on occasion, goal-relevant explanations. For example, in his *Psychologie als Wissenschaft* (1824–1825/1850), Herbart wrote of desire as a “movement of the mind” that is directed toward a particular “object.” Herbart even used the word *goal* (*Ziel*) in this context; he stated that desire “has an object to which it is directed as to its goal (*Ziel*)” (see Mischel, 1967, p. 264).

Like Herbart, other psychologically oriented philosophers utilized the notion of direction toward an object or end in their writings. Herbart’s contemporary James Mill wrote of “trains of the mind” that are “directed toward an end” (1829; see Mandler & Mandler, 1964, p. 115), and Hermann Lotze wrote of the “image of intended events” in his influential *Medicinsche Psychologie oder Physiologie der Seele* (1852, p. 301). Mill’s successor, Alexander Bain (1873; see also J. S. Mill, 1868), discussed voluntary action in terms of movement toward an idea or end in the future. It should be noted that neither Herbart nor the aforementioned psychological philosophers who followed made extensive or systematic use of goal-relevant constructs. Their main interest was in detailing the nature of mental activity, and goal-relevant constructs were simply utilized sporadically in the process of discussing issues regarding the will, causality, and voluntary action.

In 1879 Wilhelm Wundt established the first psychological laboratory—an event that is often considered the beginning of experimental psychology (Hothersall, 1984). Wundt focused

and wrote a great deal on issues of the will and volition, albeit primarily in the middle and later part of his career. He utilized goal-relevant constructs on occasion in his writing; *end* was the term he most frequently used, but *goal* (*Ziel*) itself appeared in his writing in several instances (e.g., see *Ethics*, 1892/1914, p. 88; *Grundzüge der Physiologischen Psychologie*, 1908, p. 91). However, Wundt’s work on will and volition primarily addressed issues of motives, impulses, and actions, rather than the goal construct per se; and, as in the writings of Herbart and his other predecessors, goal-relevant concepts or constructs were not discussed in a central or systematic manner in his work.

In fact, goal-relevant concepts/constructs and the term *goal* (*Ziel*) continued to be relegated to the periphery of the psychological literature throughout the latter part of the 19th century and the (very) beginning of the 20th. When goal-relevant constructs did appear, the term *end* was typically utilized, as seen in the writings of Baldwin (1894), Bradley (1901), James (1890), Kulpe (1895), and Stout (1899); other terms such as *aim* or *object* were also used on occasion in this regard. *Goal* (*Ziel*) was used only sporadically, appearing in the published version of Brentano’s 1876–1894 lectures (see Mayer-Hillebrand, 1952/1973), Dewey’s (1886) *Psychology*, James’s (1890) landmark *The Principles of Psychology*, and other psychological books and articles (see Pfänder, 1900/1967; Muirhead, 1897; Munsterberg, 1898; Shand, 1897; Thorndike, 1905; Ziehen, 1895). It was in the work of the Würzburg school that the goal construct came to the fore in psychological theorizing, and received sustained and primary conceptual and empirical attention.

Although the Würzburg school is of foremost interest herein, the advances made by this group are best seen as emerging from earlier research and theorizing on volition by other scholars. In the latter part of the 19th century, the standard account of thought and action focused exclusively on associations between stimuli and responses (Roelofs, 2004), but the sufficiency of this strict associationism was beginning to be called into question. In his analysis of volition, Wundt (1874) posited that a person’s mental preparation impacts the way the person responds to stimuli. This was empirically documented in Wundt’s lab by Ludwig Lange (1888) in what has been called “the first

experiment in volitional psychology” (Heckhausen, 1991, p. 22). Lange demonstrated that subjects were faster to respond to a stimulus when they were instructed to attend to their anticipated response than when they were instructed to attend to the stimulus itself. Oswald Kulpe (1891) conceptually replicated Lange’s work, and proposed that the instructions provided to subjects establish a specific predisposition that has an influence on the way subjects construe and respond to the task. Müller and colleagues’ (Müller & Pilzecker, 1900; Müller & Schumann, 1889) work on “motor set” and “perseverative tendencies” further highlighted the need to consider extraassociationistic principles in accounting for thought and action (Mandler & Mandler, 1964).

In their research and theorizing, members of the Würzburg school, particularly James Watt and Narziss Ach, introduced the goal construct as a way of addressing the limitations that were becoming apparent in the standard associationism. Watt, in his dissertation work (completed in 1904, published in 1905), proposed that subjects’ responses in reaction time experiments can be separated into four phases: (1) a preparatory period in which the subject readies him- or herself for the presentation of the stimulus, (2) presentation of the stimulus, (3) working on the response, and (4) the response. Watt contended that the volitional act takes place in the first, preparatory phase when the task instructions are given to the subject, and the subject prepares for action accordingly. These task instructions were labeled *Aufgaben*, and *Aufgaben* were viewed as establishing an *Einstellung* (“set”) to respond in a particular way. Preparation following the *Aufgabe* during the first phase was presumed to be a conscious process, but Watt believed that the influence of the *Aufgabe* during the remaining phases took place outside of consciousness.

Watt’s colleague, Narziss Ach, developed an analysis of volition fundamentally similar to that of Watt, only more elaborate and detailed. Ach began his initial work in 1900 at Göttingen, and finished it in 1904 (published in 1905) at Würzburg (Boring, 1957). Despite their shared conceptual viewpoint, Ach and Watt used different terminology to portray the goal construct. Whereas Watt used the term *Aufgaben*, Ach used *Zielvorstellung*, commonly translated as “goal image.” Ach also utilized the term *determining tendency* rather than the more general term *Einstellung* when

making reference to the consequences of a *Zielvorstellung*. For Ach (1905), “the *Zielvorstellung* . . . results in a determination in the sense of or in accordance with the meaning of th[e] *Zielvorstellung*. These determining tendencies form the basis of those psychological phenomena whose manifestations have been traditionally subsumed under the concept of volitional activity” (p. 197). Ach viewed the determining tendency as the crucial link between the *Zielvorstellung* and the emitted response, and he viewed this tendency as operating outside of conscious awareness. In addition to his 1905 book, Ach contributed a second book in 1910 that provided an even more elaborate explication of the role of *Zielvorstellung* and determining tendencies in volitional activity.

It is interesting to note a subtle but important difference in the goal constructs used by Watt and Ach. Watt’s (1905) *Aufgaben* literally meant “task” or “instruction,” and referred specifically to the task instructions provided by the experimenter to the subject. Although Watt clearly presumed that subjects accepted and followed these externally provided task instructions, his *Aufgaben* construct did not refer to the task instructions as internally represented by the subject. Later scholars have tended to read this meaning into the term (G. W. Allport, 1935; Bolles, 1993; Roelofs, 2004), but this meaning was not a part of the original construct (see Boring, 1957). Ach’s (1905) *Zielvorstellung* (goal image), on the other hand, explicitly carried the notion of the task instructions as mentally represented by the subject. Thus, relative to Watt, Ach may be seen as taking a bolder (or at least more explicit) step away from direct stimulus–response (S-R) associationism and toward mediation by mental representation.

Watt and Ach limited their analysis and examination of the goal concept to *Aufgaben* and *Zielvorstellung* elicited from external sources such as instructions, commands, or suggestions; intrapsychic sources of goals were not considered (Rapaport, 1951). In England, William McDougall took up this issue in *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), in which he laid out the foundational elements of a fundamentally goal-directed account of behavior. McDougall posited instinct as the ultimate source of all behavior, and viewed goals as operating in the service of instincts. He defined *instincts* as innate, emotionally grounded dispo-

sitions that represent the springs or energizers of all thought and action. He did not explicitly define *goal* in the first edition of *An Introduction to Social Psychology*; rather, he simply used the term in a colloquial sense on a few occasions, and relied on the term *end* (p. 239) when referring to the goal concept. However, by the printing of the eighth edition of this groundbreaking work, McDougall (1914) repeatedly used the term *goal* in a technical sense to denote "desired object" (p. 365) and "end of action" (p. 358), and he stated that the function of a goal is "to guide the course of action" (p. 359). McDougall explicitly and emphatically characterized the behavior of all organisms as "purposive" in nature, by which he meant to convey "goal-directed."

Although McDougall's technical definition of *goal* was straightforward, it should be noted that he used the term in two different ways in his writing, each of which carried a somewhat different meaning. First, McDougall used the term to refer to an inherently valued, general end-state that forms the terminal guiding point of an instinct. Each instinct contains a natural goal of this sort, and there are a limited number of natural goals (and, therefore, a limited number of instincts). Used in this sense, the goal construct is inextricably tethered to the instinct construct; it is a component of the instinct construct, rather than a separate construct in and of itself. McDougall also used the goal construct to refer to the myriad variety of ends that individuals may seek as a function of learning, experience, and self-based processes. Although these other types of goals can emerge from various sources, they are ultimately seen as subgoals or means operating in the distal service of the natural goals of the instincts. McDougall focused less on and wrote less explicitly about goals of this later type.

McDougall's work, along with that of Watt and Ach, was highly influential at the beginning of the 20th century in establishing a central role for the goal construct in accounts of thought and action. In essence, the work of these theorists put the goal construct on the psychological map. However, despite the fact that specific goal constructs were being introduced to the psychological literature and the word *goal* (*Ziel*) was being utilized more regularly, the word remained rather uncommon as the second decade of the 20th century began. This point may be illustrated by the fact that Baldwin's (1911) authoritative and ostensibly

comprehensive *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* did not even contain an entry for *goal*. The terms *action*, *end*, *intention*, *motivation*, *objective*, *plan*, *purpose*, *volition*, and *will* were all included, but not *goal*. *End* was clearly the entry that was designated to cover the content of the goal construct.

Alfred Adler, like McDougall, proposed a thoroughly goal-based, future-oriented portrait of behavior. From Adler's perspective, "A person would not know what to do with himself were he not oriented toward some goal. We cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal" (Adler, 1914; see Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 96). The term *goal* (*Ziel*) appeared in Adler's writings as early as 1908 (Adler, 1908a, 1908b), but he did not use it in a technical, systematic sense until 1912 in his book *The Neurotic Constitution*. In this work (Adler, 1912/1926; see also Adler, 1914), Adler did not offer a definition of *goal* per se; rather, he introduced a specific form of goal construct labeled *fictional final goal* (also termed *guiding self-ideal*). This fictional final goal was characterized as the person's subjectively perceived, uniquely conceived life ambition that gives direction and meaning to life. Adler believed that all human activity reflects a desire to overcome a deep sense of inferiority by striving for domination (or, as he articulated later, for perfection, superiority, and completeness), and that this striving takes its concrete form in the individual's fictional final goal. This goal was thought to be largely outside of the person's conscious awareness, and was characterized as the internal unifying principle and guiding cause of a person's actions. In his later work, Adler (1931) added that in daily life, this ultimate goal is served by myriad other idiographic strivings. For Adler, to truly understand a person, one must know the individual's fictional final goal, which lends coherence and stability to the self and personality.

In his 1915 *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud made use of the goal construct in laying out his first systematic conceptualization of motivation. The focal construct in this conceptualization was *instinct*, which he portrayed as an internal, biologically based "drive" or "need." Freud delineated several different aspects of the instinct construct, one of which he labeled *Ziel* (which is typically translated as "aim" in the psychoanalytic literature). *Ziel* refers to the state that the instinct aims for, which is satisfaction in the form of the (complete and

immediate) elimination of stimulation. Freud distinguished between two types of *Ziel*: “ultimate” *Ziel*, which is the aforementioned satisfaction of the instinct; and “intermediate” *Ziel*, which represents alternative ways and means of acquiring satisfaction. Overall, Freud’s use of the goal concept was rather abstract and did not occupy a central place in his theorizing.

With the rise of behaviorism in the second decade of the 20th century, mentalistic concepts, including goal-relevant concepts, began to be seen as outside the purview of a scientific psychology. However, Robert Woodworth, in his influential textbook *Psychology: A Study of Mental Life* (1921), argued strongly that a strict S-R psychology could not sufficiently explain behavior. Specifically, he embraced the general S-R framework, but contended that the notion of purpose must additionally be given consideration:

What persists, in purposive behavior, is the tendency towards some end or goal. The purposeful person wants something he has not yet got, and is striving towards some future result. Whereas a stimulus pushes him from behind, a goal beckons to him from ahead. This element of action directed towards some end is absent from the simple response to a stimulus. In short, we have to find room in our stimulus-response psychology for action persistently steered in a certain direction by some cause acting from within the individual. (1921, pp. 70–71)

Following this statement, Woodworth proceeded to present a diagram that put a T (for “inner tendencies,” or states that “last for a time and direct action,” p. 71) in between the S-R, thereby representing a $S \rightarrow T \rightarrow R$ psychology. This $S \rightarrow T \rightarrow R$ framework (which others would later generalize to $S \rightarrow O \rightarrow R$, with O denoting “organism”) clearly retained an important role for mentalistic concepts such as goals in a scientific psychology.

Woodworth’s declaration set the stage for a purposive behaviorism, with Edward Tolman serving as prominent spokesperson. Tolman, like Woodworth, remained convinced of the need to make reference to processes intervening between stimulus and response, such as *purpose* or *goal seeking* (terms he considered synonymous; Tolman, 1925b, p. 285), to adequately describe and understand behavior. As a behaviorist, Tolman sought to account for the seemingly goal-seeking nature of behavior by relying exclusively on objective descriptions of

the observable actions of the organism. Specifically, he defined *goal seeking* in terms of the “persistence until” quality of behavior: “It is this purely *objective* fact of persistence until a certain type of goal-object is reached that we define as a *goal-seeking*. And as thus defined, a goal-seeking is a wholly objective and a wholly behavioristic phenomenon. There is nothing ‘mentalistic’ about it” (Tolman, 1925b, p. 286).

Goal object was Tolman’s (1925a) goal construct, and it was defined as the object or situation toward which or away from which the organism moved. Tolman was an animal psychologist, so the goal objects that he typically focused on in his research and literature reviews were things such as food that an animal would strive to obtain or confinement from which an animal would struggle to escape. Tolman posited that the strength of the demand of a particular goal object varies as a function of both the inherent positive or negative value of the goal object (e.g., bread and milk are preferred to sunflower seeds; see Simmons, 1924) and the present physiological state of the organism (e.g., increased hunger produces increased demand; see Elliott, 1929). In his classic book *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*, Tolman (1932) proceeded to distinguish between two different types of goal objects: an ultimate goal object and a subordinate goal object. The ultimate goal object was defined as the state of physiological quiescence or disturbance that the animal persists to attain or eliminate, and the subordinate goal object was the aforementioned type of goal object that was now conceptualized as the means of getting to or from the ultimate goal object.

In his “molar” account of behavior, Tolman (1920) declared the broad adjustments and actions of the whole organism to be the focal unit of analysis, in contrast to J. B. Watson’s (1913) “molecular” account, which focused on isolated muscle movements and glandular secretions. This molar level of analysis retained a central place for the goal construct in psychology, and demonstrated that behaviorism and a consideration of goals were not necessarily incompatible.

A contemporary of Tolman, Kurt Lewin, developed an elaborate, dynamic analysis of behavior that was unabashedly mentalistic and goal-based. In his initial work, Lewin (1922) followed in the tradition of Watt and Ach in attempting to account for the effects of task in-

structions on subjects' responses by using extraassociationistic constructs. From this starting point, Lewin (1926, 1935) proceeded to construct an extensive theoretical account of behavior that focused on the goals toward or away from which behavior is directed, and the various motivational forces that underlie goal direction. The term *goal* (*Ziel*) was both central to and ubiquitous in Lewin's theorizing, and the term appeared in myriad forms in his writing, including *concrete goal* (Lewin, 1926), *goals of will* (Lewin, 1926), *real goal* (Lewin, 1935), *ideal goal* (Lewin, 1936), *action goal* (Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944), *dream goal* (Lewin et al., 1944), *wish goal* (Lewin et al., 1944), *verbal goal* (Lewin et al., 1944), *true goal* (Lewin et al., 1944), and *inner goal* (Lewin et al., 1944). Given the clear importance of the goal concept in Lewin's work, it is surprising that he neglected to provide a precise, technical definition of the term. Indeed, the word *goal* (*Ziel*) was not even included in the extensive glossary of psychological concepts provided at the end of the 1936 overview of his theoretical concepts entitled *Principles of Topographical Psychology*. The closest Lewin came to defining *goal* in this work was to state, "It is not usually correct to designate the material object itself as the goal. The goal is usually an action or state, for instance the eating of an apple or the possessing of an object" (p. 110). Throughout his theorizing, Lewin seemed to presume that goals were so integrally interwoven into the fabric of behavior that their nature was obvious and not in need of precise delineation.

Two primary contexts in which Lewin made use of the goal construct may be identified. First in his topographical model, Lewin conceptualized goals as the positively or negatively "valenced" activities or objects that attract or repel the person (respectively), and he portrayed them as residing within a "region" of a person's perceived psychological "life space" (Lewin, 1926, 1935). Lewin focused on the goal as represented by the person in his theorizing, and viewed goals (or goal regions) as the endpoints of a complex dynamic of situation-specific "needs," "tensions," and "forces." Second, Lewin (see Hoppe, 1930; Lewin et al., 1944) conceptualized goals in terms of the specific targets or aspirations that individuals select and strive to attain in achievement situations. The level of a person's aspiration was posited to be a function of characteristics of the

task itself and stable tendencies within the person (Lewin et al., 1944). Lewin's work on both the topographical model and on aspiration behavior had a widespread and lasting influence, and his explicit championing of the goal construct clearly helped to further anchor it as an important explanatory tool in scientific psychology.

By the 1930s, the goal construct had come into its own in the psychological literature. The word *goal* was commonplace, and was used as a scientific term to describe or explain psychological phenomena. Researchers and theorists addressing diverse issues and writing from diverse perspectives made use of goal constructs in their work. For example, Hull (1931, 1932) introduced the ideas of a *goal gradient* and a *fractional anticipatory goal response* in the early stages of developing his drive-based conceptualization of behavior. Mace (1935) conducted a series of experiments explicitly designed to examine goal setting as an independent variable. F. H. Allport (1937) coined the term *teleonomic trend* to describe the individual's dynamic and enduring attempts at goal striving throughout daily life. Murray (1938) portrayed needs as inner states of tension that impel the individual to strive for a certain goal. Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) placed goals at the center of their conceptualization of frustration and aggression. It is important to note, however, that many psychologists during this time, including B. F. Skinner (1938), argued strongly against positing intervening variables focused on purpose or goal direction in the scientific study of behavior.

From the 1930s onward, most of the goal constructs utilized in psychological research and theory had conceptual precedent in the work of the pioneers overviewed in the preceding discussion. Most subsequent work focused on introducing specific variants of goal constructs or applying the goal construct to the study of various motivational issues. One additional development is particularly noteworthy, however: the emergence of a cybernetic portrait of goal-directed behavior.

The notion that the functioning of machines may be described in terms of goal-directedness had been present in psychological thought as early as Loeb's theory of tropisms (Crozier, 1929; see also Lotka, 1925). However, it was Rosenblueth, Wiener, and Bigelow (1943; see also Wiener, 1948) who firmly established this

idea by describing the "behavior" of machines in terms of goals and negative feedback (i.e., discrepancy reduction) processes. A thermostat, for example, contains a target temperature (a goal) and regulates its "behavior" according to this target. That is, a thermostat operates by comparing the current temperature to the target temperature, and if a discrepancy is detected, heat is turned on until the discrepancy is eliminated. Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960; see also Mowrer, 1960) adapted this cybernetic analysis to human behavior. They posited that people possess representations of standards (viewed as goals) for their behavior, and that these standards are part of a cognitive mechanism that is used to regulate their behavior. This cognitive mechanism was purported to operate like a thermostat. One's current behavior is compared to one's standard, and if a discrepancy is detected, action is enacted until the discrepancy is eliminated. Miller and colleagues' cognitively based analysis of goal-directed behavior was concordant with the increasingly cognitive emphasis in psychology, whereby the need, motive, and drive constructs with which goals were often thought to be associated were omitted from consideration (Pervin, 1989).

GOAL DEFINED AND CONCEPTUALIZED

Our linguistic analysis of the word *goal* (*Ziel*) has taken us back to chariot races in the Roman Circus, and our historical analysis of the goal construct has taken us back to the psychological musings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. From these ancient roots, the term and construct "goal" appeared in many different forms and variations, but a few themes may be identified.

First, at the time that psychology emerged as a scientific discipline, a figurative use of the word *goal* (*Ziel*) was firmly in place in the German and English languages. Both languages shared a common figurative sense, which was, in essence, "something striven for that directs action." Early use of goal and goal-relevant constructs in scientific psychology followed this figurative meaning.

Second, the term *goal* (*Ziel*) was not commonly used in the psychological literature until long after the establishment of psychology as a scientific discipline. *End* was the term usually used in reference to goals, even after goals be-

gan to be examined in rigorous, programmatic research. When *goal* (*Ziel*) did emerge as a common psychological term, it was often used without provision of a technical definition, and those scholars who did provide a definition tended to do so briefly and in passing. Thus a clear and consensual definition of *goal* was not present in the early literature on goal and goal-relevant constructs.

Third, the goal construct was used in different ways by different scholars as scientific psychology developed. Thus a consensual conceptualization of *goal* was not present in the literature, either. Nevertheless, it is possible to note some basic features of *goal* that appeared, implicitly or explicitly, in many early conceptualizations: (1) It is focused on an object, (2) it is used to direct or guide behavior, (3) it is focused on the future, (4) it is internally represented (only strict behaviorists disagreed with this point), and (5) it is something that the organism is committed to approach or avoid. Given the common utilization of these characteristics of *goal* in early conceptual work, it seems wise to incorporate them into a contemporary definition of the term. Accordingly, we offer the following definition: A *goal* is a cognitive representation of a future object that the organism is committed to approach or avoid.

In the following, we offer brief commentary on each primary aspect of our definition of *goal*. This commentary is not meant to be complete or to comprehensively address the myriad metatheoretical and philosophical issues raised by any goal definition. Rather, it is meant to more clearly and explicitly articulate the goal construct implicit in our definition. Furthermore, although we take a specific stand in our commentary on many issues relevant to the goal construct, in no way do we intend to wed our goal definition to any specific model or theory of goals, self-regulation, or motivation. Rather, we intend to provide a definition and explication of the goal construct that is applicable to and may be utilized within many different models and theories.

In large part, our definitional and conceptual efforts are guided by a sense that the term *goal* has been utilized in too vague and broad (if not all-encompassing) a fashion, both in the history of psychological thought and especially in recent years. Popular psychological constructs are sometimes applied so extensively that they end up with little precise meaning and little explanatory utility (see Locke, 1969, for exam-

ples), and we are concerned that the goal construct is in danger of this fate. As such, our aim, as much as anything, is to constrain—and in so doing hone—the goal construct.

Cognitive Representation

A goal is a cognitive representation; this means that the goal construct is restricted to animate organisms that utilize a mental apparatus in the process of regulation. Some define *goal* in terms of an internal, rather than a cognitive representation (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996), thereby allowing the goal construct to be incorporated within mechanical devices (see cybernetic and some control theories in this regard). We acknowledge that standard-based discrepancy reduction in a mechanical context shares some similarities to cognitively mediated goal striving in animate organisms, but we also contend that there are important differences between these two forms of regulation (see Bandura, 1986; Locke & Latham, 1990; Nuttin, 1984). Mechanical devices, for example, rely on an extrinsically supplied and invariant energy source for operation, and therefore afford a less flexible regulatory process than that observed in intrinsically and dynamically energized animate organisms (see Nuttin, 1984). As such, we think it is best to use terms such as *standard* and *reference value* rather than *goal* in mechanical models, and to consider negative feedback processes as analogous to rather than isomorphic with goal processes (see Carver & Scheier, 1998).

An important issue in the goal literature concerns the precise way in which goals are represented within the cognitive system. Bargh (1990), Kruglanski (1996), Shah (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003), and others have recently highlighted the fact that goals, as knowledge structures, operate according to general cognitive principles, and have documented several interesting and informative implications of this point. However, goal representations are also quite distinct from other, simpler cognitive representations, in that they contain additional features such as a specific commitment with regard to an object (Ach, 1935). Little is known at present about the nature of this complex form of representation and the *unique* cognitive principles by which it might operate (for speculation, see Herbart, 1824–1825/1850; Lewin, 1926; Wyer & Srull, 1986; for recent empirical work, see Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-

Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001; Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005, Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002).

Future

A goal is focused on the future; it is a cognitive representation of something that is possible in the future. Goal-directed behavior is proactive, not reactive. It entails use of a future image as a guide to present behavior; it does not simply entail an immediate, unmediated response to a present stimulus (behavior of this latter type may be considered reflex-directed rather than goal-directed). Implicit in this conceptualization is that the mental image of the future possibility has a *causal* influence on present behavior.

In contrast to several theorists (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Binswanger, 1986; Klinger, 1977; Locke, 1969), we do not consider the actions of plant life (e.g., the sunflower turning toward the sun) or simple organisms (e.g., the amoeba moving away from light) to involve goal direction. In these cases, the organism is simply reacting reflexively to an encountered stimulus; it is not responding with regard to an envisioned possibility. Likewise, and also in contrast to the aforementioned theorists, we do not view autonomic physiological functions such as digestion or blood circulation as goal-directed, in that these functions are carried out without any prevision or imaging of the future. Plants, simple organisms, and internal organs may carry out actions that outwardly mimic goal-directed behavior, but to attribute future-focused directionality in these instances is, in our view, fallacious.

Object

The object of a goal (i.e., the *goal object*) is the hub or focal point of regulation. We use the term *object* broadly herein to refer to an entity, event, experience, characteristic, and so on that is the centerpiece of the goal. Objects may be of an infinite variety of content, and may be concrete or abstract, physical or psychological, observable or unobservable. Furthermore, objects may be classified in terms of valence: Some entities, events, experiences, characteristics, and so on are positively valenced, whereas others are negatively valenced.

Importantly, the object of the goal is not the goal itself. A goal encompasses both an object

and some sort of approach or avoidance commitment with regard to the object. For example, in the goal "Develop a deeper relationship with my wife," "a deeper relationship with my wife" is the object, and "develop" is the (appetitive) commitment. Likewise, in the goal "avoid failing my calculus class," "failing my calculus class" is the object, and "avoid" is the (aversive) commitment. Both an object and an approach/avoidance commitment are necessary, conceptually separable components of a goal. This issue has been the source of much confusion over the years; as in many dictionary definitions and psychological conceptualizations, it is unclear whether *object* is meant to refer to the hub of regulation or to the goal itself.

Committed To

A cognitive representation of a future object that the organism would like to approach or avoid is not a goal; it is a wish or fantasy (Gollwitzer, 1990; cf. Ford, 1992), an incentive (Klinger, 1977), or a goal candidate (Elliot & Friedman, 2005). It is only when an organism commits to some directional action with respect to a cognitively represented future object that a goal may be said to have been adopted. Degree of commitment may, of course, vary considerably, both within and between goals; this variability has important implications for effort, persistence, and absorption in the goal pursuit process.

By *commit*, we mean "consciously commit." We think it is best to restrict the term *goal* to commitments that have their origin in conscious acts of volition. Once in place in the cognitive system, goals may be activated and may operate in a thoroughly automatic, nonconscious fashion, as compellingly demonstrated by Bargh and colleagues (see Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Chartrand & Bargh, 2002). From this perspective, goals are to be differentiated from needs and motives, in that needs and motives have their origin in inherent tendencies or nonconscious affective learning processes (McClelland, 1951; Murray, 1938). In addition, the nomothetic terminal point of a need or motive, which is sometimes referred to as *goal*, would seem best labeled something like *need object*, *motive object*, *satisfier*, or *end-state*. This separation of goals from needs and motives allows the two types of constructs to

operate in concert in hierarchical fashion, with needs and motives functioning as energizers of behavior, and goals directing this energization in a way that flexibly (and idiographically) serves the needs and motives (Elliot & Church, 1997). In this way, the same need or motive may prompt the use of different goals, and different needs or motives may prompt use of the same goal. Importantly, needs and motives may at times affect behavior without goal mediation (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989); this raises interesting, and largely overlooked, questions about the different properties of need- and motive-oriented, relative to goal-directed, behavior. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are many antecedents of goal adoption besides needs and motives (e.g., self-beliefs and perceptions, relational histories, specific environmental affordances), some of which may derive from or be associated with needs and motives, and others of which may be completely independent (see Elliot, 1999; Kuhl, 2000; Shah, 2003).

Approach or Avoid

Approach-avoidance is a basic psychological distinction that is applicable to all forms of goals (Elliot & Covington, 2001). By *approach* we mean "move toward or maintain a positively valenced object," and by *avoid* we mean "move or stay away from a negatively valenced object." Approach and avoidance movement may entail actual physical activity (e.g., "Go on a date with Julie") or psychological activity (e.g., "Develop a better relationship with Julie").

As implied above, approach and avoidance take on different manifestations as a function of the current presence or absence of the goal object. If a positively valenced object is currently absent, approach entails trying to move toward the object, whereas if a positively valenced object is currently present, approach entails trying to maintain the object. In similar fashion, if a negatively valenced object is currently absent, avoidance entails trying to keep away from the object, whereas if a negatively valenced object is currently present, avoidance entails trying to get away from the object (see Lewin, 1938; Mowrer, 1960). Within each of these manifestations of approach and avoidance are myriad idiographic possibilities.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The goal construct is clearly integral to motivational analyses of behavior, and it is surprising how little definitional and conceptual work has been done on goals, given their prominence in the literature. Our aim in this chapter has been to highlight the need for explicit attention to this issue, and to glean insights from common language and the history of psychological thought in the process of crafting a precise definition and conceptualization of *goal*. We carry no illusions that our definition and conceptualization will please all. Any attempt to pursue precision in this arena is fraught with difficulty, as it inevitably raises many age-old meta-theoretical and philosophical questions, and runs the risk of stepping on scholarly toes. Nevertheless, it is our hope that our attempt at precision will generate dialogue and thoughtful consideration about this simple yet profound psychological construct, and that the result will be a more clear and judicious use of the term *goal* in contemporary theory and research on motivation.

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