Avoidance Personal Goals and Subjective Well-Being

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The present research comprises two studies designed to investigate both antecedents and consequences of pursuing avoidance (relative to approach) personal goals over the course of a semester-long period. Results revealed that neuroticism was positively related to the adoption of avoidance personal strivings (Study 1), and participants with low perceptions of their life skills were more likely to adopt avoidance personal projects (Study 2). Avoidance regulation proved deleterious to both retrospective and longitudinal subjective well-being (SWB), as participants with a greater proportion of avoidance goals reported lower SWB over the course of the semester and evidenced a decrease in SWB from the beginning to the end of the semester. Ancillary analyses attested to the robustness of these results across a variety of alternative predictor variables. Path analyses validated perceived progress as a mediator of the direct relationships observed.

In the past decade, personality psychology has witnessed the (re)emergence of a conative approach to personhood (Little, 1993), as researchers and theorists have begun to posit personal goals as central organizers of affect, cognition, and behavior. Personal goals may be defined as consciously articulated, personally important objectives that individuals pursue in their daily lives; they are self-investments that provide individuals with a sense of purpose, structure, and identity (Brunstein, Danglmayr, & Schultheiss, in press; Emmons, 1989; Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). Personal goals have been operationalized differently by different theorists—as life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), current concerns (Klinger, 1977), and personal projects (Little, 1983; see Cantor & Zirkel, 1990, for specifics regarding these and other approaches). A central focus of personal goal research, across these different operationalizations, has been the identification of characteristics of personal goals that predict variation in subjective well-being (SWB). A number of personal goal characteristics have been empirically linked to SWB, including level of representation, enjoyment, social support received, social hindrances encountered, expected success, importance (and Expected Success × Importance), past success, conflict, ambivalence, integration, need satisfaction, and absorption (Brunstein, 1993; Cantor, Norem, Langston, Zirkel, Fleeson, & Cook-Flannagan, 1991; Emmons, 1986, 1992; Emmons & King, 1988; Omodei & Wearing, 1990; Palys & Little, 1983; Ruchelman & Wolchik, 1988; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995).

The primary purpose of the present research was to investigate the relationship between avoidance (relative to approach) personal goals and SWB. The approach-avoidance distinction is grounded in the regulatory focus of the goal: An approach goal is focused on a positive outcome or state, whereas an avoidance goal is focused on a negative outcome or state. Thus, self-regulation according to an approach goal entails trying to move toward (or maintain) a desirable outcome or state, whereas self-regulation according to an avoidance goal entails trying to move away from (or stay away from) an aversive outcome or state. For example, an individual may be trying to be more conscientious and efficient, to be cheerful and friendly at parties, or to step into a leadership role at work (approach goals), or a person may be trying to avoid procrastination, to stop being...

Authors' Note: Our gratitude is expressed to Alicia Freedman, Christine Perfeiti, and Rachel Stanek for their assistance in the data collection and management processes. Kennon M. Sheldon is now at the Department of Psychology, University of Missouri–Columbia. Address correspondence to Andrew J. Elliot, Department of Psychology, Meliora Hall, University of Rochester, Rochester NY 14627, e-mail andye@scp.rochester.edu.

PSPB, Vol. 23 No. 9, September 1997 915-927
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such a bore at parties, or to not become a follower at work (avoidance goals). To date, little empirical attention has been allocated to the link between avoidance personal goals and SWB (and SWB-related constructs); the following is a review of the relevant research.

Klinger, Barta, and Maxeiner (1980) had participants list 10 “current concerns,” categorize each concern as positive (approach) or negative (avoidance), and rate each concern according to the amount of positive affect expected upon attainment. Results indicated that the proportion of negative concerns listed by participants was negatively related to their expectations of positive affect. In an organizational setting, Roberson (1990) had employees generate a list of their job-related personal goals and complete a standard job satisfaction questionnaire. Participants’ goals were classified as positive (approach) or negative (avoidance), and results indicated that the proportion of negative goals listed by participants was negatively related to their job satisfaction. Moffitt and Singer (1994) had participants generate self-defining memories and report their affective responses to the memories, and then had them return a week later to list 15 “personal strivings” and categorize each striving as positive (approach) or negative (avoidance). Results revealed that participants with a greater percentage of negative strivings responded with less positive affect to their memories. Coats, Janoff-Bulman, and Alpert (1996) had participants list their personal strivings, rate their amount of happiness typically felt when successful at each striving, and complete a self-report measure of depression. Results revealed that the number of avoidance strivings listed by participants was negatively related to their reports of happiness upon success and positively related to their reports of depression (see also Emmons & Kaiser, 1996).

In sum, the existing data suggest that the adoption of avoidance personal goals is negatively related to SWB-related constructs, but the literature is clearly at a nascent stage of development. Two important questions in need of investigation are whether the pursuit of avoidance goals over time has negative ramifications and whether avoidance regulation has negative implications for global SWB. The present research represents two studies designed to address this question. In both studies, SWB was operationalized as a composite of participants’ positive affectivity, negative affectivity, and life satisfaction (the three primary components of SWB identified by Andrews & Withey, 1976; see also Diener, 1984). In Study 1, participants’ personal goals were assessed at the beginning of a semester-long period, and their retrospective SWB was measured at the end of the semester. Study 2 used the same procedure as Study 1 but also incorporated a longitudinal element into the design by having participants report their current SWB at both the beginning and the end of the semester (thereby enabling an investigation of change in SWB over the course of the semester). We predicted that the pursuit of avoidance goals over the semester-long period would prove deleterious to SWB, as indicated by both the retrospective and the longitudinal assessments.

In addition to investigating the effect of avoidance goal pursuit on SWB, the present studies also focused on perceived progress—the individual’s belief that he or she is being effective in his or her goal pursuits—as a mediator of the hypothesized direct relationship. Indeed, our rationale for predicting the negative relationship between avoidance regulation and SWB is grounded in perceived progress as a mediator variable: We anticipated that the pursuit of avoidance goals would lead to low perceptions of progress and that low perceived progress, in turn, would be negatively associated with SWB. There are a number of reasons why avoidance goal pursuit might lead to low perceived progress. First, the focus on negative possibilities inherent in the pursuit of avoidance goals is likely to induce worry, threat, and anxiety, and research has clearly shown that such states undermine the process of self-regulation (Hembree, 1988; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). Second, avoidance regulation is likely to be less efficient and, therefore, less effective than approach regulation because it provides a negative outcome or state to move or stay away from but does not (in and of itself) provide a positive outcome or state to keep the individual focused in a specific direction (Carver, 1996; see Skinner’s [1971] critique of punishment for a conceptual analog). Third, even when avoidance and approach regulation are equally effective (objectively), the successful avoidance of a negative outcome or state (i.e., the absence of a negative) may be more difficult to detect (see Wegner, 1994) or may be interpreted less favorably (see McFarland & Miller, 1994) than the successful attainment of a positive outcome or state (i.e., the presence of a positive).

Regarding the perceived-progress-to-SWB link, theorists from diverse perspectives have posited competence-relevant perceptions (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived competence, perceived progress) as important predictors of health and well-being outcomes. Organismic theorists (e.g., Ryan, 1995; White, 1963), for example, contend that feelings of competence and mastery are essential for one’s vitality and self-esteem. Likewise, control theorists (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990) propose a direct relationship between perceived progress (or rate of progress) in discrepancy reduction and physical and psychological well-being (see also Bandura, 1986; Harter, 1989). A sizable empirical yield attests to the veracity of these propositions (see Ford, 1992, for a review of the literature), and in the present research, we anticipated that low perceptions of progress would be negatively related...
to SWB. Furthermore, we predicted that the relationship between avoidance regulation and SWB would no longer be significant when perceived progress was controlled, thereby indicating that the pursuit of avoidance goals is linked to SWB through the mediational process of perceived progress.

The final objective of the present research was to explore possible antecedents of the adoption of avoidance personal goals. If the pursuit of avoidance goals indeed has negative implications for SWB, it is important to understand what prompts individuals to select these nonoptimal forms of self-regulation. Recent research by Emmons and McAdams (1991) identified one antecedent of avoidance personal goals—activity inhibition (operationalized as the frequency with which the word not was used in a set of projective stories). In the present research, we investigated two additional possibilities—participants' neuroticism and participants' perceptions of their life skills and competencies.

Neuroticism (N) is defined by Eysenck and Eysenck (1968) as a general propensity toward emotional instability and overreactivity. Some theorists essentially equate N with negative affectivity and propose a direct relationship between N and avoidance-based processes (e.g., worry, anxiety, punishment expectancies; Tellegen, 1985; Zuckerman, 1991); others contend that N is best understood in conjunction with extraversion (E) and that avoidance-based processes are strongest in neurotic introverts (Gray, 1987; Newman, 1987). Supportive data have been obtained for each of these conceptualizations of N (see Ball & Zuckerman, 1990; Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Derryberry & Reed, 1994; Wallace, Newman, & Bachorowski, 1991), and in Study 1 of the present research, we sought to test both N and E in interaction with E as a predictor of avoidance regulation. In Study 2, we focused on life skills—the competencies and abilities necessary for effective negotiation of daily life (Sheldon & Kasser, 1996)—as a potential antecedent variable. Life skills such as the ability to budget time effectively and to adopt different roles as the situation requires may be viewed as social or pragmatic intelligence (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Sternberg & Salter, 1982) or personal resources (Diener & Fujita, 1995) available to individuals in the self-regulatory process. Little (1989) suggested that individuals' personal goals reflect their beliefs in their skills and competencies, and in the present research, we predicted that the perceived lack of such skills would be reflected in the tendency to regulate according to the avoidance of negative outcomes or states.

N and life skills were not only tested as antecedent variables in the present research but also employed as alternative predictors in ancillary analyses investigating the link between avoidance regulation and SWB. If the hypothesized relationship could be documented holding N (and E, and N X E) and life skills constant, it would indicate that avoidance goals are not mere epiphenomena of these general, nomothetic variables but that avoidance regulation per se undermines SWB. Two idiosyncratic, goal-based variables commonly conceptualized as indicators of the strength or quantity of motivation—progress expectancies and importance—were also assessed and tested (individually and in interaction) as alternative predictors.

In summary, the present research comprises two studies designed to investigate both antecedents and consequences of pursuing avoidance (relative to approach) personal goals over the course of a semester-long period. Participants high in N (alone or in interaction with E) and those with low perceptions of their life skills are predicted to be more likely to adopt avoidance forms of regulation. The pursuit of avoidance goals during the semester is predicted to be negatively related to participants' SWB, assessed both retrospectively and longitudinally. This relationship is expected to be independent of the general variables employed as antecedents, as well as the specific, goal-based measures—progress expectancies and importance (and their interaction). Perceived progress throughout the semester is predicted to mediate the hypothesized direct relationship, as avoidance regulation leads to less perceived progress and low perceptions of progress, in turn, prove deleterious to SWB.

STUDY 1

Method

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 177 university undergraduates in a psychology class participated in the study for extra course credit. Eleven individuals started but did not complete the study, resulting in an attrition rate of 6.2% and a final sample of 166 (71 male, 95 female) participants. The mean age of participants was 20, with a range of 17 to 37.

OVERVIEW OF PROCEDURE

The study was conducted in a series of sessions held throughout the course of the semester. During the second week of the semester, participants completed measures of N and E. One week later, participants identified 10 personal strivings that they would be pursuing during the semester. For each striving, they also indicated how well they expected to do and how important it was for them to do well at the striving. Three times over the course of the semester (every 3 to 4 weeks), participants completed a mediator variable questionnaire in which they reported their ongoing perceptions of progress regarding their strivings. During the final week of the
semester, participants reported their SWB for the semester-long period.

**NEUROTICISM AND EXTRAVERSION MEASURES**

Eysenck, Eysenck, and Barrett's (1985) 12-item versions of the N and E scales from the EPQ-R (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised) were employed as indicators of N (sample item: “Would you call yourself tense or ‘high strung?’”) and E (sample item: “Do others think of you as being very lively?”), respectively. Research has attested to the comparability of the short form of the EPQ-R and the EPQ (Francis, Phillipchalk, & Brown, 1991), and numerous empirical investigations have attested to the reliability and validity of the N and E scales (Campbell & Reynolds, 1982; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Eysenck et al., 1985). Participants indicated their responses on a yes-no scale, and their “yes” responses were summed to form the N (Kuder Richardson 20 = .87) and E (Kuder Richardson 20 = .83) indices.

**PERSONAL STRIVINGS ASSESSMENT**

**Selection of strivings.** Personal strivings were defined for participants as “things that you typically or characteristically are trying to do in your daily life ... the purposes or goals that you seek in your everyday behavior.” Participants were instructed to list the 10 strivings that best described what they would be trying to do in their daily life during the semester (see Emmons, 1986, for details on the standard strivings elicitation procedure). Examples of personal strivings listed by participants are “trying to be more organized,” “trying to avoid being lonely,” and “trying to excel in my workplace.”

In defining the concept of personal strivings, explicit attention was drawn to the distinction between approach and avoidance strivings, and participants were encouraged to consider both types of strivings as they generated their representative list. This had two unintended consequences. First, many participants listed strivings that included both approach and avoidance components. Thus, rather than code the strivings for approach and avoidance (as we had initially intended), we asked participants to classify each of their strivings as approach or avoidance (they selected the designation that best described the striving) in a questionnaire at the end of the semester (for a similar procedure, see Klinger et al., 1980; Moffitt & Singer, 1994). Second, as indicated below, participants listed a somewhat higher proportion of avoidance strivings than that observed in our pilot work and existing research (e.g., Moffitt & Singer, 1994).

**Proportion of avoidance strivings.** An avoidance strivings index was created for each participant by summing the number of avoidance strivings listed in their set of 10 representative strivings (this variable may alternatively be construed as the proportion of avoidance to total strivings listed). Of the 1,660 strivings listed, 475 (28.6%) were avoidance strivings, and the observed range for avoidance strivings was 0 to 8.

**Expected progress and importance measures.** Participants rated each striving with regard to how well they expected to do at the striving and how important it was for them to do well at the striving. Responses could range from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very), and participants’ ratings were averaged across their 10 strivings to form expected progress and importance indices, respectively.

**ONGOING PERCEIVED PROGRESS MEASURE**

Three times over the course of the semester, participants reported their perceptions of progress for each of their strivings on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very). These ratings were averaged across the 10 strivings and then averaged across the three assessment periods to form a perceived progress index (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

**SWB MEASURE**

The SWB measure was composed of items that assessed participants’ positive and negative affectivity and life satisfaction “during the past semester.” The positive and negative affectivity items consisted of the 20-item Positive Affect/Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Tellegen, & Clark, 1988), and participants indicated how often they had felt each affect (e.g., enthusiastic, nervous) on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very frequently). The life satisfaction items consisted of (with minor modifications) the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement (e.g., “I have been satisfied with my life”) on a scale ranging from 1 (no agreement) to 5 (very much agreement). An SWB index was created by individually summing the scores for the positive affectivity items, negative affectivity items, and life satisfaction items and then summing the standardized scores for positive affectivity and life satisfaction and subtracting the standardized score for negative affectivity (see Brunstein, 1993; Emmons & Colby, 1995). The Cronbach’s alpha for the SWB index was .92.

**Results**

**PRELIMINARY ANALYSES**

**Participant attrition.** T tests were conducted to determine whether participants who did and did not complete the study systematically differed on any variables. No significant differences were observed.

**Sex differences.** T tests were conducted to probe for sex differences on each of the variables employed in the
study. Two significant relationships were revealed. Females \((M = 5.40)\) scored higher on N than did males \((4.97)\), \(t = 2.93, p < .005\). Females \((M = 7.37)\) also rated their strivings as more important than did males \((M = 7.08)\), \(t = 1.99, p < .05\). No other sex differences were observed. Preliminary multiple regression analyses testing for sex interactions were also conducted; no significant relationships were obtained.

**EXPECTED PROGRESS AND IMPORTANCE**

Pearson correlations were computed to determine the relationship between avoidance strivings and both expected progress and importance. The only significant correlation was between avoidance strivings and expected progress, \(r = -.20, p < .05\), which indicated that participants with a greater number of avoidance strivings expected to do worse on their strivings during the semester. The means, standard deviations, and ranges for these and the other variables in the study are presented in Table 1.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEUROTICISM AND AVOIDANCE STRIVINGS**

N was tested as an antecedent of avoidance strivings by conducting a simultaneous multiple regression analysis in which avoidance strivings was regressed on N, E, and the N×E interaction product term (computed from centered variables). The regression yielded a significant effect for N, \(F(1, 162) = 6.45, p < .05\) \((\beta = .20)\), indicating that participants high in N listed a greater number of avoidance strivings. Neither E nor the N×E interaction attained significance.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANCE STRIVINGS AND SWB**

A Pearson correlation was computed to determine the relationship between avoidance strivings and SWB. The correlation was significant, \(r = -.24, p < .005\), indicating that participants with a greater number of avoidance strivings reported experiencing less well-being over the course of the semester. Next, a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted in which SWB was regressed on avoidance strivings with an alternative predictor variable (or set of variables) also inserted into the equation. The alternative predictor was N in the first analysis; N, E, and the N×E interaction product term in the second; expected progress in the third; importance in the fourth; and expected progress, importance, and the Expected Progress×Importance interaction product term in the fifth. Avoidance strivings remained a predictor of SWB at \(p < .05\) in each of these analyses, suggesting that the observed relationship cannot simply be reducible to a general avoidance tendency or to commonly endorsed indicators of the quantity of motivation.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANCE STRIVINGS AND PERCEIVED PROGRESS**

A Pearson correlation was computed to determine the relationship between avoidance strivings and perceived progress, the hypothesized mediator variable. The correlation was significant, \(r = -.19, p < .05\), indicating that participants with a greater number of avoidance strivings reported lower perceptions of progress during the semester.

**MEDIATIONAL ANALYSIS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED PROGRESS AND SWB WITH AVOIDANCE STRIVINGS CONTROLLED**

The hypothesized mediational model was tested by conducting a multiple regression analysis in which SWB was regressed on perceived progress with avoidance strivings also in the equation (see Judd & Kenny, 1981, for guidelines for establishing mediation). The overall model was significant, \(F(3, 162) = 35.62, p < .0001\) \((R^2 = .40)\). Perceived progress was a significant predictor of SWB, \(F(1, 162) = 87.72, p < .0001\) \((\beta = .58)\), indicating that lower perceptions of progress over the semester were associated with lower SWB, and the direct relationship between avoidance strivings and SWB was no longer significant with perceived progress in the equation (the \(\beta\) for this relationship dropped from -.24 to -.11). These results establish perceptions of progress as a partial mediator of the relationship between the pursuit of avoidance strivings and SWB. A sex difference also emerged in this analysis, \(F(1, 162) = 6.29, p < .05\) \((\beta = -.15)\), revealing that males reported higher SWB than females (when avoidance strivings and perceived progress are controlled). Figure 1 presents a pictorial summary of the mediational process documented in these analyses.

**Discussion**

The results from this study provided support for each of our substantive hypotheses. Participants high in N
displayed a propensity to adopt avoidance (relative to approach) personal strivings. The relationship between N and avoidance strivings was direct, unmoderated by E. Avoidance regulation proved deleterious for SWB, as participants with a greater proportion of avoidance strivings reported lower SWB over the course of the semester. Ancillary analyses demonstrated the robustness of this relationship across the antecedent variables (N, E, and N × E) and across indicators of the quantity of motivation (expected progress, importance, and Expected Progress × Importance). Path analyses validated perceived progress as a mediator of the direct relationship between the pursuit of avoidance strivings and SWB.

Study 2 represents an attempt to conceptually replicate and extend Study 1. Accordingly, Study 2 used the same basic procedure as Study 1, with three primary changes. First, participants' perceptions of their life skills, rather than N, was investigated as an antecedent of avoidance goal adoption. Having linked avoidance regulation to an emotion-/temperament-based antecedent in Study 1, we sought to investigate a qualitatively distinct form of antecedent in Study 2, one based in competence-relevant self-beliefs. Second, personal projects (Little, 1983), rather than personal strivings, were employed as the unit of self-regulation. Although personal projects can range from highly molar (e.g., “Develop myself as an intellect and scholar”) to more molecular levels of representation (e.g., “Read Dostoyevsky every night before bed”), the personal project methodology tend to elicit more molecular, contextualized goals than the personal strivings methodology. In Study 2, we sought to investigate the generalizability of the Study 1 findings to the personal projects level of analysis. Third, in addition to the retrospective assessment of SWB, SWB was assessed longitudinally by having participants report their current SWB at both the beginning and end of the semester. The majority of research in the existing personal goals literature is concurrent or cross-sectional in nature, and theorists have repeatedly sounded the call for longitudinal data (Brunstein, 1993; Diener, 1984). The sole use of a retrospective indicator of SWB may be considered a limitation of Study 1, and in Study 2, we provided a more stringent test of our hypotheses by adding a longitudinal element to the design used in Study 1.

STUDY 2

Method

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 72 university undergraduates in a psychology class participated in the study for extra course credit. Seven individuals started but did not complete the study, resulting in an attrition rate of 9.7% and a final sample size of 65 (29 male, 36 female) participants. The mean age of participants was 21, with a range of 18 to 48.

OVERVIEW OF PROCEDURE

The procedure for Study 2 was highly similar to that of Study 1. Life skills, personal projects, progress expectations, and importance were all assessed at the beginning of the semester. Participants also reported their current SWB at this time. Three times over the course of the semester (every 3 to 4 weeks), participants rated their ongoing perceptions of progress regarding their projects. At the end of the semester, participants reported their current SWB and, 4 days later, completed a retrospective measure of SWB for the semester-long period.

LIFE SKILLS MEASURE

The 10-item life skills measure devised by Sheldon and Kasser (1996) was used to assess participants’ perceptions of their basic skills and competencies. Items for the measure were generated on the basis of Cantor and Kihlstrom’s (1987) conceptualization of social intelligence (see also Sternberg, Conway, Keton, & Bernstein, 1981) and Diener and Fujita’s (1995) notion of personal resources. Social and self-regulatory skills subscales were derived via factor analysis. Sheldon and Kasser (1996) reported adequate reliability and strong predictive validity for the two subscales (respective sample items: “I can express myself and communicate effectively” and “I can conceive of an appropriate plan to attain my goals”). Participants in the present study were instructed to rate themselves on each item (relative to other university students) using a scale ranging from 1 (much less than average) to 9 (much more than average), and their responses were summed to form an overall life skills index (Cronbach’s alpha = .76), as well as two subscales, social skills (Cronbach’s alpha = .73) and self-regulatory skills (Cronbach’s alpha = .82).

PERSONAL PROJECTS ASSESSMENT

Selection of projects. Personal projects were defined for participants as “goals and concerns that people think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not
always) complete or succeed at.” Participants were instructed to generate a set of candidate projects that would last “at least through the end of the semester” and then select the six “most relevant” projects for their representative list (see Little, 1983, for details on the standard projects elicitation procedure). Examples of personal projects listed by participants are “improve my tennis game,” “not be so judgmental of people,” and “go to church on Sundays and holy days.” No mention was made of the approach-avoidance distinction during this assessment.

Proportion of avoidance projects. Two trained research assistants independently categorized each personal project as approach or avoidance. Interjudge agreement was 99.3%; disagreements were resolved through discussion. An avoidance projects index was created for each participant by summing the number of avoidance projects listed in their set of six representative projects. Of the 450 projects listed, 42 (9.8%) were avoidance projects, and the observed range for avoidance projects was 0 to 2.

Expected progress and importance measures. For each project, participants rated their perceived ability to make progress and their commitment to making progress on the project. Responses were indicated on a scale ranging from 1 (very little/not at all) to 9 (very much/extremely), and participants’ ratings were averaged across their six projects to form expected progress and importance indices, respectively.

ongoing perceived progress measure

Three times over the course of the semester, participants rated each project (on a scale ranging from 1 = none to 7 = many) with regard to the number of major advances and the number of major setbacks they encountered in pursuing the project. These ratings were averaged across the six projects for each measure and averaged across the three assessment periods, then the major setbacks total was subtracted from the major advances total to form a perceived progress index (Cronbach’s alpha = .84).

SWB MEASURES

The retrospective SWB measure was the same as that employed in Study 1. The beginning-of-semester and end-of-semester SWB measures assessed participants’ current positive and negative affectivity and life satisfaction. The positive and negative affectivity items consisted of Brunstein’s (1993) eight-item Affect Scale (four positive, e.g., happy; four negative, e.g., anxious), supplemented with an additional eight items (four positive—excited, interested, proud, determined; four negative—upset, bored, ashamed, uncertain) drawn from the literature on affective experience. Participants indicated on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very frequently) how often they had felt each affect (e.g., happy, depressed) during the past few days. Brunstein’s two-item Life Satisfaction Scale was used to assess participants’ present life satisfaction; on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree), participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement (e.g., “At present, I am completely satisfied with my life”). Beginning-of-semester SWB (Cronbach’s alpha = .88) and end-of-semester SWB (Cronbach’s alpha = .91) indices were created with the same procedure used to form the retrospective SWB measure (Cronbach’s alpha = .93).

results

preliminary analyses

Participant attrition. T tests were conducted to determine whether participants who did and did not complete the study systematically differed on any variables. No significant differences were observed.

Sex differences. T tests were conducted to probe for sex differences on each of the variables used in the study. A single relationship was revealed: Females (M = 6.94) rated their projects as more important than did males (M = 6.23), t = 2.71, p < .01. No other sex differences were observed. Preliminary multiple regression analyses testing for sex interactions were also conducted; no significant relationships were obtained.

Expected progress and importance. Pearson correlations were computed to determine the relationship between avoidance projects and both expected progress and importance. The correlation between avoidance projects and expected progress was −.24 (p = .05), which indicated that participants with a greater number of avoidance projects tended to have lower expectations for their goal pursuits during the semester. The means, standard deviations, and ranges for these and the other variables in the study are presented in Table 2.

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Observed Range</th>
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<td>3.33 to 9.00</td>
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<td>Importance</td>
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<td>-5.60 to 5.15</td>
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<td>Retrospective SWB</td>
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<td>-6.15 to 4.71</td>
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NOTE: SWB = subjective well-being.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFE SKILLS AND AVOIDANCE PROJECTS

A Pearson correlation was computed to determine the relationship between life skills and avoidance projects. The correlation was significant, $r = -0.29$, $p < .05$, indicating that participants with low perceptions of their skills listed a greater number of avoidance projects. A multiple regression analysis was then conducted in which avoidance projects was regressed on social skills and self-regulatory skills. The regression yielded a significant effect of self-regulatory skills, $F(1, 69) = 4.06, p < .05$ ($\beta = -0.24$), indicating that participants reporting fewer self-regulatory skills listed a greater number of avoidance projects. Social skills was not significantly related to avoidance projects.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANCE PROJECTS AND SWB

A Pearson correlation was computed to determine the relationship between avoidance projects and retrospective SWB. The correlation was significant, $r = -0.35$, $p < .005$, indicating that participants with a greater number of avoidance projects reported experiencing less well-being over the course of the semester. To investigate the relationship between the proportion of avoidance projects listed and change in SWB over the semester-long period, end-of-semester SWB was regressed on avoidance projects with beginning-of-semester SWB also in the equation. The regression yielded a significant effect for beginning-of-semester SWB, $F(1, 62) = 19.34, p < .0001$ ($\beta = 0.47$), indicating that participants with high SWB at the beginning of the semester also had high SWB at the end of the semester. More important, the avoidance projects effect also attained significance, $F(1, 62) = 4.35, p < .05$ ($\beta = -0.23$), indicating that participants pursuing a greater number of avoidance projects evidenced a decline in SWB from the beginning to the end of the semester.

Next, a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted in which the above analyses were repeated with an alternative predictor variable (or set of variables) also inserted into the equation. The alternative predictor was skills in the first analysis; social skills and self-regulatory skills in the second; expected progress in the third; importance in the fourth; and expected progress, importance, and the Expected Progress x Importance interaction product term in the fifth. Avoidance projects remained a predictor of SWB (both retrospective and longitudinal) at $p \leq .05$ in each of these analyses, suggesting that the observed relationships cannot simply be reducible to perceptions of skill level or to commonly endorsed indicators of the quantity of motivation.

Figure 2: The mediational model for retrospective and longitudinal subjective well-being (SWB).

NOTE: Path values are standardized regression coefficients.

$\cdot p < .05, **p < .01$

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AVOIDANCE PROJECTS AND PERCEIVED PROGRESS

As in Study 1, the hypothesized mediational model was tested by conducting multiple regression analyses in which one of the indicators of SWB was regressed on perceived progress with avoidance projects also in the equation. The overall model was significant for retrospective SWB, $F(2, 61) = 16.58, p < .0001$ ($R^2 = .35$). Perceived progress was a significant predictor of retrospective SWB, $F(1, 61) = 23.40, p < .0001$ ($\beta = .52$), indicating that lower perceptions of progress were associated with lower SWB, and the direct relationship between avoidance projects and retrospective SWB was no longer significant in this equation (the $\beta$ for this relationship dropped from -.35 to -.19). These results establish perceptions of progress as a partial mediator of the relationship between the pursuit of avoidance projects and retrospective SWB.

The overall model was also significant for end-of-semester SWB (with beginning-of-semester SWB controlled), $F(3, 59) = 11.43, p < .0001$ ($R^2 = .37$). Perceived progress was a significant predictor of end-of-semester SWB, $F(1, 59) = 8.83, p < .005$ ($\beta = .34$), indicating that lower perceptions of progress were associated with reduced SWB from the beginning to the end of the semester. The direct relationship between avoidance projects and end-of-semester SWB was no longer significant with perceived progress in the equation (the $\beta$ for this relationship dropped from -.23 to -.14). These results establish perceptions of progress as a partial mediator of the
TABLE 3: Primary Results From Studies 1 and 2 With Accompanying Meta-Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoidance Goals to SWB</th>
<th>Avoidance Goals to Perceived Progress</th>
<th>Perceived Progress to SWB, Controlling for the Direct Effect</th>
<th>Overall Mediation Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>$\beta = -24^*$</td>
<td>$\beta = -19^*$</td>
<td>$R^2 = .40^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>$\beta = -0.55^<em>/-23^</em>$</td>
<td>$\beta = -26^*$</td>
<td>$R^2 = .35^<em>/.37^</em>$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-analysis</td>
<td>$z = 4.60^*$</td>
<td>$z = 3.23^*$</td>
<td>$z = 7.90^*$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: SWB = subjective well-being. For Study 2, results for retrospective SWB are presented first, followed by results for $\Delta$ SWB. Avoidance goal is a generic term representing avoidance savings (Study 1) or avoidance projects (Study 2). The $z$ values were obtained using the Stouffer method (Rosenthal, 1978); the meta-analysis of the avoidance-goals-to-SWB relationship collapsed across indicators of SWB.

*p < .05, **p < .01.

The relationship between the pursuit of avoidance projects and reduced SWB from the beginning to the end of the semester. The relationship between beginning-of-semester SWB and end-of-semester SWB remained significant with perceived competence in the equation. Figure 2 presents a pictorial summary of the mediational processes documented in these analyses. Table 3 presents a summary of the primary results from Studies 1 and 2, with an accompanying meta-analysis (Rosenthal, 1978).

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicated and extended those obtained in Study 1. Participants with low perceptions of their life skills adopted a higher proportion of avoidance personal projects. Self-regulatory skills, in particular, proved the most reliable antecedent of the adoption of avoidance projects. Avoidance regulation during the course of the semester was negatively related to both retrospective SWB and longitudinal SWB. These direct relationships remained significant in analyses holding a variety of alternative predictors constant (life skills, self-regulatory and social skills, expected progress, importance, and Expected Progress x Importance). As in Study 1, path analyses demonstrated that perceived progress mediated the direct relationships observed.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the present research, two studies were conducted to investigate both antecedents and consequences of the pursuit of avoidance (relative to approach) personal goals over the course of a semester-long period. Results from Study 1 provided nice support for our hypotheses, and Study 2 replicated and extended the Study 1 findings. Avoidance regulation was linked to two different antecedent variables, one was emotion/temperament based—N (Study 1)—and the other was based in competence-relevant self-beliefs—life skills (Study 2). Participants high in N and with low perceptions of their life skills displayed a propensity to adopt avoidance personal goals. In both studies, the pursuit of avoidance goals proved detrimental to SWB. Participants with a greater proportion of avoidance goals reported lower SWB over the course of the semester and evidenced a decrease in SWB from the beginning to the end of the semester. Ancillary analyses demonstrated the robustness of these relationships across the antecedent variables and across indicators of the quantity of motivation (expected progress, importance, and Expected Progress x Importance). Path analyses validated perceived progress as a mediator of the direct relationships between avoidance regulation and both retrospective and longitudinal SWB.

We believe the antecedent data linking N and life skills to avoidance regulation are valuable because they help us understand the nature of avoidance personal goals and their role in the broader context of personhood. Generally stated, we view personal goals as concrete, idiographic representations that emerge from more general, nontheoretical dispositions and orientations (e.g., temperaments, motives, global self-perceptions). These general dispositions/orientations are construed as too abstract to regulate behavior directly; their contribution to the self-regulatory process is presumed to be indirect via their recruiting of personal goals with (relatively) specific outcome or state foci. Thus, personal goals are presumed to function as strategic, midlevel self-regulatory forms, performing in the service of their more diffuse, higher order dispositions/orientations (see Elliot & Church, 1997; Emmons, 1989; Nuttin, 1984). From this perspective, the present data suggest that avoidance personal goals are strategic self-regulatory devices adopted by neurotics and those with low perceptions of their life skills as they attempt to negotiate their social worlds. Negative outcomes or states are more salient possibilities for individuals possessing a low threshold for negative affect (neurotics) and those lacking requisite life skills; accordingly, such individuals display a propensity to recruit specific self-regulatory forms focused on moving or staying away from negative possibilities.

Although we view N and life skills as important antecedent variables, it is undoubtedly the case that other dispositions/orientations prompt the adoption of avoid-
ance goals, either independent of or in concert with N and life skills. Candidates worthy of empirical attention include global self-perceptions (e.g., low self-esteem; Tice, 1994), characteristic volitional tendencies (e.g., state orientation; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994), and general outcome expectancies (e.g., pessimism; Scheier & Carver, 1985). The N × E interaction tested in Study 1 should also remain on this short list of antecedents worthy of investigation. Although the present data support the “N main effect” over the “N × E moderator variable” hypothesis, additional research is needed before a definitive judgment can be made regarding the relative utility of the two perspectives.

Analyses investigating the consequences of avoidance goal adoption clearly revealed that avoidance regulation over the course of the semester-long period had negative implications for SWB. Three aspects of these consequences data are noteworthy. First, the deleterious nature of avoidance goal pursuit was documented using a longitudinal, as well as retrospective, assessment of SWB. Longitudinal data are particularly informative in that they afford an analysis of change in the focal dependent measure and they nicely rebut alternative interpretations based on general response tendencies. Thus, the longitudinal data in Study 2 enabled us to conclude that avoidance regulation was associated with a reduction in SWB during the semester, and the use of beginning-of-semester SWB as a control variable rendered unlikely the possibility that the relationship observed between avoidance projects and end-of-semester SWB was merely a function of a negative response set.

Second, a series of ancillary analyses attested to the robustness of the relationships observed between avoidance regulation and retrospective and longitudinal SWB across a variety of alternative predictor variables. The analyses controlling for the antecedent variables suggest that avoidance goals are indeed central players in the self-regulatory process, not mere epiphenomena of more general propensities or perceptions. In similar fashion, the analyses controlling for progress expectancies, importance, and their interaction illustrate the need to conceptualize approach-avoidance and expectations of competence as independent constructs (see Elliot & Church, 1997; Kukla, 1972; W. Meyer, 1987), and they highlight the importance of attending to variation in the quality, as well as quantity, of motivation in the process of self-regulation (see also Deci & Ryan, 1990; Sheldon & Kasser, 1996).

Third, the negative relationship between avoidance goal pursuit and SWB was observed employing both personal strivings and personal projects as the unit of self-regulation. Thus, avoidance regulation appears to be nonoptimal at the molecular, contextualized level as well as at the more molar, abstract level (Emmons, 1992). An intriguing question for future research is whether avoidance regulation is deleterious across the full spectrum of the goal hierarchy, and, if so, whether it is equally deleterious at all levels. It seems reasonable to argue that higher order, more abstract avoidance goals (e.g., “I must avoid being like my mother”) possess the most pernicious potential because of their superordinate position in the self-regulatory system (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Emmons, 1989). It is possible, however, that the pursuit of avoidance goals closely linked to specific behaviors (e.g., “I must avoid staring at people while conversing with them”) is so fraught with anxiety, distraction, rumination, and other disruptions that such regulation is rarely effective, and, even when effective, it is phenomenologically aversive (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Wegner, 1994). The cumulative negative impact of this avoidance regulation at the level of “trivial pursuit” may rival or even surpass that engendered by avoidance at the level of “magnificent obsession” (Little, 1989).

In addition to investigating issues pertaining to the level of avoidance regulation, it may be informative to contemplate whether different types of avoidance regulation have a differential impact on SWB. In the present research, we have construed avoidance goals as unitary self-regulatory forms focused on negative outcomes or states. It is possible, however, to differentiate avoidance regulation by considering other aspects of goals such as (a) whether they are grounded in the prevention of a potential negative outcome or state or the eradication of an existing negative outcome or state (see Ogilvie & Rose, 1995) or (b) whether they represent internally generated introjects demanding appeasement or threats of punishment imposed from an external source (see Ryan & Connell, 1989; Sheldon & Elliot, in press). Although we suspect that each of these regulatory forms would be negatively related to SWB, some may be more so than others, and we are currently conducting additional research to explore this possibility.

Results from the present studies not only documented the hypothesized link between avoidance regulation and SWB but also established perceived progress as a mediator of this direct relationship. The pursuit of avoidance goals was associated with low perceptions of progress during the semester, and this low perceived progress had negative implications for both retrospective and longitudinal SWB. Thus, consistent with organismic (White, 1959), control (Carver & Scheier, 1990), and social-cognitive (Bandura, 1986) theorizing, these data suggest that the self-regulatory path to well-being runs through perceptions of progress and competence. These data also appear to implicate the adoption of avoidance goals as a psychological vulnerability in that it places individuals at risk for ineffective self-regulation and subsequent decrements in SWB. Although the documentation of
perceived progress as a mediator variable clearly afforded a more precise analysis of the relationship between avoidance regulation and SWB, additional research is needed to pinpoint the precise mechanisms responsible for the relationship between avoidance regulation and perceived progress itself. Earlier, we suggested a number of possibilities (e.g., worry, anxiety, threat appraisals), and the empirical documentation of such processes in a “linked” meditational model (e.g., avoidance regulation \(\rightarrow\) high anxiety \(\rightarrow\) low perceived progress \(\rightarrow\) decreased SWB) would clearly be of value.

Throughout the present discourse, we have proceeded with the implicit assumption that our hypotheses regarding the antecedent, consequence, and mediational variables represent causal relationships. It is important to note, however, that the results reported are correlational in nature, thereby precluding definitive conclusions regarding causality. Causal inferences necessitate experimental methodologies, and personal goals, by their very nature as idiothetic self-investments, are not readily amenable to experimental manipulation. Nevertheless, in the present research, we have not only obtained evidence in support of our hypothesized relationships but also attempted to eliminate plausible alternative explanations for the observed findings via the following procedures: placing the assessments in appropriate temporal order and separating the assessments in temporal space (Studies 1 and 2), using a longitudinal design (in Study 2), and conducting numerous ancillary analyses with plausible third variables such as N or expected progress (Studies 1 and 2).

From the turn of the century to the present day, positive thinking and imaging has been extolled by ministers, self-help authors, musicians, and other purveyors of folk wisdom and popular culture (D. Meyer, 1988). One of the most prominent spokespersons for this tradition was Norman Vincent Peale, who, in his success tract *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1956), wrote,

> You can think your way to failure and unhappiness, but you can also think your way to success and happiness; ... think positively ... and you set in motion positive forces which bring positive results to pass. Positive thoughts create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of positive outcomes. On the contrary, think negative thoughts and you create around yourself an atmosphere propitious to the development of negative results. (pp. 169-170)

Although not particularly fond of Pealian thought (nor that of Mary Baker Eddy, Dale Carnegie, Tony Robbins, etc.), we nevertheless recognize the parallel between the present research and the positive thinking perspective. Indeed, our results appear to lend empirical support to the virtues of positive thinking and imaging, as both studies clearly attested to the costs of focusing on negative rather than positive possibilities in the self-regulatory process.

Unfortunately, our results also implicitly suggest that altering one’s mental or self-regulatory focus may not be as straightforward a process as that suggested by the positive thinking camp. Peale’s (1956) intervention proposal is representative:

> To change your circumstances, first start thinking differently ... form a picture in your mind of circumstances as they should be. Hold that picture, develop it firmly in all details, believe in it ... and you can actualize it according to that mental image emphasized in your positive thinking. (p. 170)

From our perspective, personal goal adoption must be considered within the more general context of personhood, and our data suggest that approach and avoidance goals emerge from general emotional predispositions and presumably stable self-perceptions. As such, mere exhortations to reframe one’s personal goals in terms of positive rather than negative possibilities may have limited effectiveness; it is likely that more extensive interventions addressing both the goals and their antecedents would be necessary to truly effect lasting change. Thus, we cannot conclude by recommending the dusting off of inspirational self-help paperbacks from the 1950s or the purchase of more recently proffered tapes or videos. Rather, we conclude with a call for additional empirical research, not only on the antecedents and consequences of avoidance goal adoption but also on possible strategies for fostering appetitive as opposed to aversive self-regulation.

**NOTES**

1. Additional related research has been conducted on the approach-avoidance distinction in the achievement motivation domain. Like the literature reviewed in the text, these studies tend to portray avoidance goals as nonoptimal forms of self-regulation. Roney, Higgins, and Shah (1995), for instance, provided participants with a specific goal for anagram performance and manipulated whether they received ongoing feedback focused on the number of anagrams correctly solved (positive focus) or incorrectly solved (negative focus). Affect was assessed before and after task engagement, and results revealed an increase in agitation-related affect (e.g., nervousness) for participants in the negative-focus condition. Roney and Sorrentino (1995) assessed participants’ ideal (construed as approach-based) and ought (construed as avoidance-based) goals for their introductory psychology class and investigated the relationship between discrepancies from these standards and affect. Results indicated a positive relationship between agitation-related affect and discrepancies from ought standards for performance. Most relevant to the present research, Elliot and Sheldon (1997) had participants select, from a representative list, eight achievement goals for a semester-long period and investigated the relationship between avoidance achievement regulation during the semester and SWB at the end of the semester. Results revealed a negative relationship between the proportion of avoidance goals selected by participants and their reports of SWB.
2. In Studies 1 and 2, samples sizes vary slightly across the reported results because of occasional missing data.

3. The projects elicited by this procedure indeed appeared to be more molecular in nature than those elicited by the striving procedure, although, as anticipated, there was much overlap in the level of representation elicited by the two methodologies.

4. One participant listed four rather than six personal projects.

5. In both Studies 1 and 2, the hypothesized relationship between avoidance goals and perceived progress was supported at the within-participants as well as the between-participants level of analysis (see Emmons, 1991, for details on conducting analyses at the within-participants level). These results suggest that between-participants factors, such as N, are not responsible for the association observed between avoidance goals and perceived progress. Only variables requiring an independent response for each goal may be analyzed at the within-participants level, therefore precluding the SWB variables from this level of analysis.

6. In both Studies 1 and 2, the hypothesized mediational models were also tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). The variance-covariance matrix was used as input in these analyses and LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) generated standardized parameter estimates based on maximum likelihood estimation. The results for both studies were virtually identical to those reported in the text from the multiple regression procedures. The b coefficients for all paths generated from the SEM analyses were within .01 standardized units of those generated via multiple regression procedures.

7. Most measures of N, including the one employed in the present research, are disproportionately weighted toward negative emotionality rather than emotionality per se (Carver & White, 1994). It is possible that the use of a more comprehensive indicator of N would yield results more consistent with the "N X E moderator variable" hypothesis.

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Received August 28, 1996

Revision accepted January 29, 1997