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Mixed Emotions Within the Context of Goal Pursuit

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Abstract

Development in adulthood occurs through the process of setting and working toward goals. Emotions link experiences to goals and action, and as such are integral to goal setting, evaluation of goal progress, and goal pursuit. When viewed in the context of goals, the simultaneous experience of positive and negative or “mixed” emotions coheres with the complexity of goal pursuit within the context of competing demands in daily life. Mixed emotions may be experienced as uncertainty in which goal to prioritize, ambiguity in whether an event served or impeded goal progress, or poignancy in a bittersweet moment of recognizing the losses that accompany gains. Mixed emotions therefore represent a problem that must be resolved—through either prioritization of conflicting goals, down-playing negative affective response, or goal disengagement—before goal pursuit can continue. Because mixed emotions must be resolved before they can be translated to action, the experience of mixed emotions may evoke a new awareness of priorities and available options that leads to better goal outcomes. Over time, openness to mixed emotions could result in outcomes such as better health and self-actualization.

Development occurs through the process of setting and working toward goals (Adams, Little, & Ryan, 2017; Freund & Hennecke, 2015; Hooker, 2015; Vohs & Baumeister, 2016). At a given moment, individuals are working toward multiple goals that are likely to conflict with one another. Optimal development therefore requires both the identification and prioritization of goals to effectively direct finite resources toward goal pursuit. Emotions link experiences to goals and action, and as such are integral to goal setting, evaluation of goal progress, and goal pursuit. Experiences are appraised as positive if interpreted as serving progress toward a goal, and negative when interpreted as hindering progress toward a goal. We take the view that emotional experience is inseparable from goal progress—that it is precisely through the appraisal of an experience in the environment relative to one’s goals that individuals bring meaning to their emotions (Bolkan & Hooker, 2012; Lazarus, 1991; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014; Smith, Tong, & Ellsworth, 2016). When viewed within the context of goal pursuit, mixtures of emotions—the simultaneous experience of positively

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and negatively valenced emotions—reflect the complexity of pursuing multiple goals in everyday life.

Individuals face multiple demands as they travel through the life course. Many are socially defined such as obtaining employment and building and supporting a family. Ideally, goals are also personal and self-relevant—they are tied to whom individuals would like to become (Adams et al., 2017; Bolkan & Hooker, 2012). Goals can be conceptualized in a motivational hierarchy, with higher order identity goals being ones that drive thoughts and actions over long spans of time, e.g., *being a community leader*. This goal cannot be accomplished in a day, week, or month. A series of lower-order goals, many of which can serve the higher-order goal, are more concrete and could be achieved relatively quickly, such as *organizing a fund-raising walk*, *spearheading a community forum*, or *participating in toastmasters to improve public speaking*. Although these goals differ in their levels of abstraction and temporal frames, they form a coherent organizational structure that motivates behaviors.

Emotions provide feedback that is essential to self-regulatory processes—including setting, working toward, and disengaging from goals. First, appraisal theories posit that emotions result from the interpretation of experiences relative to their congruence or incongruence with goals (Lazarus, 1991; Smith et al., 2016). Positive and negative emotions provide independent information about experiences (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Control process models describe how positive and negative emotions drive approach and avoidance motivations, respectively. Approach toward a goal is experienced as positive, and increased distance from the goal is experienced as negative (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Similarly, emotions assist goal prioritization. Positive and negative emotional experiences provide feedback on proximity to desired outcomes and can help individuals identify which goals to work toward first (Carver, 2015).

However, effective goal pursuit is not always characterized by following the positive and avoiding the negative. The momentary experience of emotions and the high level goal one is working toward are likely to exist on distinct time scales. Indeed, perseverance and delay of immediate reward is the hallmark of self-regulation (McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith, & Tominey, 2010), and the process of working toward a goal does not always feel rewarding and positive. Progress may require sacrifice, working through barriers, and frustration (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Although goal progress may eventually be associated with greater positive feelings, the practice of goal pursuit may require working through or down-playing negative responses to immediate experiences (e.g., Hennecke & Freund, 2016; Moeller, Troop-Gordon, & Robinson, 2015; Wilkowski & Ferguson, 2016). For example, the inertia of existing routines, the habits of close others, and loss of previous enjoyments make changes in behavior difficult (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Wood & Rünger, 2016). The ability to understand and regulate these negative experiences facilitates perseverance required for goal achievement (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Hennecke & Freund, 2010; Moberly & Watkins, 2010). Goal pursuit, which can be challenging, uncertain, ambiguous, and involve both gains and losses, provides a promising context to closely examine the experience and developmental implications of mixed emotions.

When viewed in the context of goals, the simultaneous experience of positive and negative or “mixed” emotions coheres with the complexity of goal pursuit within the context of competing demands in daily life. From a control process perspective, Carver and Scheier (1990) suggest two situations where mixed emotions take place within the context of goals. Experiences could have conflicting interpretations, even in reference to the same goal. For example, transitions—often milestones in goal pursuit—are known to be bittersweet (Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008; Roseman, 2017). A child’s accomplishment indicates progress toward the goal of successful parenting and is met with both great pride as well as a sense of loss as the relationship transforms. Alternatively, an event could have conflicting implications for competing goals. Joining colleagues after work may support career goals, but may hinder progress toward family goals.

Variation in the capacity to experience mixed emotions has been considered both within- and between-persons. Within individuals, the experience of mixed emotions has been found to wane in times of stress and physical pain (Zautra, Smith, Affleck, & Tennen, 2001). Between persons, trait openness and cognitive ability have been linked to a greater tolerance for and capacity to experience and process mixed emotions (Barford & Smillie, 2016; Brose, de Roover, Ceulemans, & Kuppens, 2015; Hui, Fok, & Bond, 2009). The complexity of experience, ambiguous signals that must be resolved, and the subsequent demands of mixed emotions on cognitive and physiological resources have important implications for goal pursuit.

The conflicting demands of daily life complicate steady progress toward goals. Goal pursuit within the context of life as it is lived may be best characterized as a complex and mixed emotional experience. For example, studies of goal pursuit *in situ* have shown that experiences of both support *and* hindrance toward a goal are not unusual (Hooker, Choun, Mejía, Pham, & Metoyer, 2013). Additionally, conflicting goals have been shown to elicit mixed emotions (Berrios, Totterdell, & Kellett, 2014). Taken together, mixed emotions may be experienced as *uncertainty* in which goal to prioritize (Kelly, Mansell, & Wood, 2015), *ambiguity* in whether an event served or impeded goal progress (Carver, 2015), or *poignancy* in a bittersweet moment of recognizing the losses that accompany gains (Berrios, Totterdell, & Kellett, 2017a; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008). Experiences of mixed emotions are therefore expected to be common in goal pursuit, especially when working toward higher-level goals or toward multiple goals that are similar in importance and placement in one’s goal hierarchy. The pursuit of higher-level goals (e.g., to be a good father) may elicit mixed emotions because they can be pursued following multiple pathways. Discerning the effectiveness of one pathway from another can be ambiguous, creating a mixed emotional response to events and actions. Goals that are at a parallel level in one’s goal hierarchy—for example, family goals and career goals—are more difficult to prioritize and are also expected to heighten the experience of mixed emotions in times of goal conflict. The ability to take a long-term perspective may be helpful for coping in these situations. For example, realizing that being present for a daughter’s soccer game will contribute to one’s identity as a “good parent” could ease the corresponding negative emotion associated with subsequently arriving late to a work-related meeting.

Although the experience of mixed emotions is likely to be common in goal pursuit, experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity, and poignancy could disrupt the goal-emotion feedback system (Carver, 2015). Mixed emotions therefore represent a problem that must be resolved—through either prioritization of conflicting goals, down-playing negative affective response, or goal disengagement—before goal pursuit can continue (Brandtstädter & Herrmann, 2016; Carver, 2015; Shane & Heckhausen, 2016; Vujovic, Opitz, Birk, & Urry, 2014). The hierarchical structure of goals provides a motivational framework that can resolve the mixed emotional experience of goal conflict (Adams et al., 2017; Carver, 2015; Hooker, 2015). Goals at the top of one's hierarchy are identity-related goals and evoke powerful emotion as they have great personal relevance and are thus crucial for well-being (Kelly et al., 2015). Within the context of daily life, processes of emotion regulation can resolve mixed emotional experiences. When working toward a goal, individuals can either ignore and work through their negative experiences or savor their positive experiences to resolve mixed emotions. Both processes—whether downplaying the negative or playing up the positive—emphasize the importance of the dynamic interplay of positive and negative emotions in the context of goal pursuit (Hennecke & Freund, 2010, 2016; Hooker et al., 2013). There are also times when the most adaptive response to goal conflict is goal disengagement (Brandtstädter & Herrmann, 2016; Klinger, 1975; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003). Goal disengagement is most adaptive when disengaging in one goal allows further progress toward another goal (Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2016). Although goal disengagement could resolve mixed emotions, we expect mixed emotions to linger following disengagement due to the subsequent sense of both relief and loss.

Through the process of experiencing and resolving mixed emotions, individuals amass a collection of complex, meaningful, poignant experiences of wins and losses, triumphs and failures as time passes. In the second half of life, development becomes, in part, a task of balancing gains and losses, and evidence suggests that mixed emotions are a common experience in older adulthood (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Schneider & Stone, 2015). Theories of adult development posit potential gains in the ability to differentiate emotional experiences (Magai, Consedine, King, & Gillespie, 2003) and integrate complex emotions (Labouvie-Vief, Gruhn, & Studer, 2010). As much as the likelihood of experiencing mixed emotions may increase with age, so may also the ability to resolve them. Older adults tend to pursue goals that are self-relevant, and pursue facilitating rather than conflicting goals (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). Additionally, health goals in particular have been found to become more aligned with perceptions of self (Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Freund & Hennecke, 2015). This alignment of goals with self results in greater daily progress toward goals within the context of daily life (Ko, Mejia, & Hooker, 2014). Together, with age, we expect that goals and emotional responses should become easier to prioritize, and therefore result in less conflict. Increased attention to positive and avoidance of negative experiences with age (Brose et al., 2015; Charles & Hong, 2016) may support the ability to resolve mixed emotions in the moment. Additionally, as pathways of goal pursuit narrow (or sometimes end) with age (Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2016), choosing the best strategy may become less ambiguous.

An implication of goals and their relationship to mixed emotions is that the experience of mixed emotions is strong and memorable (Larsen & McGraw, 2014). The recognition of

conflict during goal pursuit has been shown to trigger consideration of broader perspectives critical thinking about goal priorities and goal pursuit (Kleiman & Hassin, 2013). Goal conflict and their coinciding mixed emotions could therefore lead to more accurate appraisals of priorities and resources, to the ultimate benefit of goal achievement. Because mixed emotions must be resolved before they can be translated to action—the experience of mixed emotions may evoke a new awareness of priorities and available options that leads to better goal outcomes.

Therefore, because working toward multiple goals can be ambiguous, uncertain, and confusing, individuals with the capacity and willingness to experience and process mixtures of emotions are able to construct and respond to more thorough and accurate appraisals of their experiences. Although in the moment mixed emotions may be unpleasant, over extended time frames, those with a greater capacity for emotional complexity—suggesting an ability to both experience and resolve mixtures of emotions—are expected to fare better in their goal pursuits (Berrios et al., 2017b; Hershfield, Scheibe, Sims, & Carstensen, 2013).

Maintaining and proactively working toward goals is an imperative of human development. Goal progress involves conflict, in either goals or in feedback, which is likely to elicit a mixture of emotions. Mixtures of emotions are normal, transitory experiences, and the implications of mixed emotions for future health, well-being, and development across the lifespan requires future research. Although immediate experiences of mixed emotions can be troubling, confusing, or bittersweet, the capacity to process mixed emotions allows for more accurate processing of information and potential paths. Over time openness to mixed emotions and capacity to process their meaning could result in better outcomes such as health and self-actualization. Understanding the nuanced role that mixed emotions play in goal pursuit could lead to development of new interventions for successful behavior change.

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- *. Barford KA, Smillie LD. Openness and other big five traits in relation to dispositional mixed emotions. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2016; 102:118–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.07.002> This article illustrates person differences in the willingness or capacity to experience mixed emotions. These differences could be due to the appraisals of the event or due to qualities of experiences that individuals select in to.

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- ** Berrios, R., Totterdell, P., Kellett, S. When feeling mixed can be meaningful: the relation between mixed emotions and eudaimonic well-being; *Journal of Happiness Studies*. 2017a. p. 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9849-y> This study uses a quasi-experimental design to show that students who approached graduation with greater mixed emotions also reported greater eudaimonic well-being
- ** Berrios R, Totterdell P, Kellett S. Individual differences in mixed emotions moderate the negative consequences of goal conflict on life purpose. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2017b; 110:18–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.01.013> Conflicting goals has been shown to elicit mixed emotions and compromise affective well-being. This research looks at individual differences in the occurrence of mixed emotions, and showed that the negative association of goal conflict on life purpose was dampened among participants for whom mixed emotions were more common. The findings suggest that persons who are able to reside in a mixed emotions space may be able to more effectively pursue complex (and conflicting) goals.
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Highlights

- Mixed emotions are expected to be common experiences within the context of goal pursuit
- Mixed emotions send conflicting signals within the goal emotion feedback system and must be resolved for goal pursuit to continue.
- Within the goal emotion feedback system mixed emotions are resolved through goal prioritization, the regulation of immediate emotional responses, and goal disengagement
- The experience of mixed emotions may evoke cognitive processes that, over extended time frames, support goal outcomes