

Chapter Fifteen

Goal Setting and Goal Striving

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In this chapter we focus on the determinants and processes of goal emergence and goal implementation. We first address personal and situational variables leading to the formation of behavioral goals and what kind of psychological processes help or hinder goal setting. In the second part of the chapter, we discuss how set goals of different qualities predict goal attainment and which self-regulatory strategies help successful goal striving. Goal effects on cognition are discussed as possible mediators of the goal-behavior link.

The History of the Goal Concept

Behaviorists recognize goal-directed behavior by its features. Goal-directed behavior is *persistent*. A hungry rat persists in searching a maze until the pellets are reached (Tolman, 1925). Goal-directed behavior is *appropriate*. When one path is blocked, another path to the same goal is taken, or if the goal moves, the organism readily follows it. Finally, goal-directed organisms start *searching* when exposed to stimuli associated with the goal.

A behaviorist's statement that a certain piece of food is a goal for the hungry organism means (1) that the food qualifies as an incentive for the organism, and (2) that the researcher has chosen to describe the behavior of the organism relative to the food stimulus rather than relative to any other object or event. Skinner (1953) referred to goal-directedness as a shorthand description of behavior resulting from some kind of operant conditioning. Thus in the behaviorist tradition, the reference point for goal-directed behavior is not the intention or the goal set by the organism itself.

In contrast, the reference point of modern goal theories is the internal subjective goal. Goal-directed behavior refers to goals held by the individual (e.g. a person's goal to stop smoking serves as the reference point for his or her efforts to achieve this goal). Research questions focus on how and in what form goals are set and how goal setting affects behavior.