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Trouble Setting Your Savings Goals? The Moderating Effect of Religious Belief on Goal Pursuit

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Abstract text submitted online:

As with all long-term goals, savings goals are subject to the goal gradient effect which suggests that the longer the delay is between the present and the time by which the goal needs to be accomplished, the less people are motivated to pursue it. However, goal distance alone may not explain that negative correlation. We suggest that rather than distance, in and of itself, it may rather be what distance *implies* – in terms of effort investment and obstacles to overcome – that negatively impacts motivation at early stages of goal pursuit. If this is so, then anything that makes the individual feel like effort investment is worthwhile should lessen the distance effect. What might help the individual feel this way? Compensatory Control Theory suggests that people can compensate for feelings of low self-efficacy by reminding oneself of the various ways in which order and structure are present in the environment, and thus reinforcing the belief that overall things are under control. Leveraging this work, we examine if, in the context of savings goals, the usual decrement in motivation that is observed when a goal is set with implementation concreteness, at its early stages, will dissipate when people are reminded of divine control. To test this hypothesis, we conducted four experimental studies using religious beliefs for priming exposure to order. Indeed, religion has been identified as a powerful set of beliefs able to bring order and structure in one's environment. The first two studies aimed at establishing first that when participants are not confident that they can plan their retirement savings, exposure to order by activating beliefs in divine control increased goal commitment. Because individuals who hold higher level of religiosity should adhere to the belief in divine control, study 1 provided correlational support for our hypothesis by measuring religiosity and demonstrating its relation to goal commitment. To isolate causality, study 2 employed an experimental manipulation of religiosity by emphasizing either a controlling God, a non-controlling God, or nothing. Studies 3 and 4 aimed at testing our hypothesis by directly priming concreteness of implementation plans, and demonstrated that it was not merely exposing participants to a religious stimuli that produced the expected effect, but specifically exposure to order.

Mini paper:

As with all long-term goals, savings goals are subject to the goal gradient effect, which suggests that the longer the delay is between the present and the time by which the goal needs to be accomplished, the less people are motivated to pursue it. Recent developments have suggested that goal distance alone may not entirely explain that negative correlation (Townsend and Liu 2012). In the early stages of goal pursuit, it may rather be what distance *implies* – in terms of effort investment and obstacles to overcome before attaining the ideal goal state – that negatively impacts motivation (Bandura 1997, Huber 1985).

The objective of this research is to show, in the context of savings goals, that when a long-term goal is framed as distal, implementation of concrete plans lessens motivation for its pursue unless s/he has been exposed to order. Compensatory Control Theory suggests that people can compensate for feelings of low self-efficacy or self-regulatory strength by reminding oneself of the various ways in which order and structure are present in the environment (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, and Laurin 2008). Then, when planning a savings goal at its early stages with concrete implementations, the usual decrement in motivation that is observed will dissipate if people are reminded of general order in their environment. To test this hypothesis, we used four experimental studies using religious beliefs for priming exposure to order. Indeed, religion has been identified as a powerful set of beliefs able to bring order and structure in one's environment (Kay et al. 2008).

Because past research found that activating thoughts of God had a negative impact on active goal pursuit (Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons 2012), we conducted first two studies to contrast that conclusion by priming participants' confidence in planning their retirement savings (thus, high goal distance in itself). In both studies, before completing the savings commitment scale (Cheema and Bagchi 2011), participants in the high [low] confidence condition read that recent studies showed that a large majority of Americans managed [failed] to accomplish the necessary steps to save enough money and assure their financial well-being in retirement.

Because individuals who hold higher level of religiosity should adhere to the belief in divine control, study 1 provided correlational support for our hypothesis by measuring religiosity ($n = 111$ Americans, 78 females, median age: 33). Controlling for age and income, the analysis did not yield a significant interactional effect between the manipulation of confidence in planning and religiosity ($\beta = -.14$, $t(105) = -.87$, ns). However, we observed that the slope of religiosity was positive and significant for participants in the low confidence condition ($b = .31$, $t(104) = 2.08$, $p = .04$) but not for those in the high confidence condition ($b = .11$, $t(104) = .93$, $p = .35$). Thus, consistent with our hypothesis, the higher religiosity, the higher savings commitment is in time of low self-efficacy in planning retirement savings.

To isolate causality, a second study employed an experimental manipulation of religiosity based on a reading test prior to priming participants' confidence in planning their retirement savings. Study 2 used a 3 (exposure to order: controlling God vs. non-controlling God vs. baseline) x 2 (confidence: low vs. high) between subject design ($n = 140$ Americans, 99 females, median age: 34). Orthogonal planned comparisons (controlling for age and income) revealed that when confidence in planning was low, activating thoughts of a controlling God increased savings commitment compared to the neutral condition ($t(131) = 3.06$, $p < .01$). In

contrast, that difference was not significant when confidence in planning was high ($t(131) = 1.40$, ns). Furthermore, in average, participants in the non-controlling God condition scored significantly lower than those in the two other conditions averaged ($t(131) = -2.03$, $p = .05$). Thus, denying general order caused an overall negative effect on savings commitment.

Studies 3 and 4 aimed at testing our hypothesis by directly priming concreteness of implementation plans, meaning by asking participants to be specific (vs. vague) in planning their savings goals. Study 3 used a 2 (exposure to order: controlling God vs. baseline) \times 2 (planning: concrete vs. abstract) between subject design ($n = 164$ Americans, 117 females, median age: 33). While the procedure for exposure to order was similar to study 2, implementation concreteness was primed by asking participants to list a savings goal they intended to pursue and expected to accomplish within six months. They were subsequently asked either to select the amount targeted among a set of ranges (abstract planning), or to enter it and indicate how much they intended to save for each of the six months to come (concrete planning). Controlling for age, income, and goal importance, the analysis yielded a significant interactional effect ($F(1, 156) = 6.23$, $p = .01$), and savings motivation was significantly higher for those exposed to order within the concrete planning condition than those who were not ($t(156) = 2.21$, $p = .02$).

Study 4 aimed at pointing out that the effect in study 3 was specifically due to exposure to order and not just a religious stimuli. Thus, study 4 used a 3 (exposure to order: controlling God vs. creating God vs. baseline) \times 2 (planning: concrete vs. abstract) between subject design ($n = 207$ Americans, 153 females, median age: 33). After the reading test, participants were asked to read a scenario aiming at priming implementation concreteness. An ANOVA yielded a significant interactional effect ($F(2, 201) = 4.19$, $p = .02$), and orthogonal planned comparisons revealed that savings motivation was significantly higher for those exposed to order within the concrete planning condition in comparison to the baseline condition ($t(201) = 1.69$, $p = .05$).

In sum, our research emphasizes the role of exposure to order in goal pursuit. Because setting a savings goal with implementation concreteness, at its early stages, heightens people's lack of confidence in their abilities to successfully achieve it, they may experience demotivation. We show however that exposure to order via religious beliefs flips the effect and improves self-regulation by promoting an ordered and structured worldview. Further research should test this conclusion with another source of order and structure than divine control, for example at a cognitive level by pattern perception (Whitson and Galinsky 2008).

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