Investigating Experiences of Long-Term Goal Maintenance

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how students ages 18 and up maintain their progress toward their long terms goals. We gathered information on their past experiences and their current goals, in order to assess how the participants define and think about their goals, and how they progress toward their goals. We used a grounded theory approach (Holton, J.,2018) as the methodology of our research to help us explore all the possibilities within the external environment and internal mental state of our participants that could motivate or demotivate them. Through our analysis, a theory of plans vs. emotions emerged, with a possible opportunity to support "trusting one's plan" as the strategy to navigate this tension.

Introduction

As students, we were influenced by our experiences within the realm of goal setting. As we reach adulthood and beyond, we have more autonomy to decide what success means and what kind of lives we want to have. Thus, we wanted to study how adults define and perceive their goals and how they sustained motivation to work toward their goals.

Background

People generally think about the future either regularly or periodically. But, what is most interesting to see is how people stay on track and maintain their long-term goals that they have chosen.

There are research studies done which extensively talk about the motivations in an individual to persist on a long-term goal in the work environment. Studies have shown that people often regard a long-term plan as a five-year plan or a ten-year plan, and this is usually in a work-setting. Goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) talks about how people exert effort and focus on long-term persistence to achieve their long-term goals. This theory also comes from the notion that one's current behavior is often affected when people perceive their future in the form of goals. Goals are nothing but representations of internal desires (Austin & Vancouver, 1996).

Our study focused more on students aged eighteen and above. We wanted to learn how young adults perceive their future and goals. The motivations they elicit in a study environment and how they plan and persist on the roadmap they have drafted for themselves. Short term goals motivate people as they reap immediate results, and long-term goals usually lack the reinforcement that might motivate people to persist (Karniol & Ross, 1996). In this study, we observed how people are able to motivate themselves to achieve their goals.

Methods

We used word of mouth communication to gather a convenience sample of four participants that were 18 years or older and possessed long-term goals. For the exploratory purpose of this study, we chose not to define what constituted as a long-term goal and left the definition for participants to determine.

We used a grounded theory approach and also used mixed methods initially that included photovoice (Wang C. & Burris M. A.,1994) and interviews.

Between the time of recruitment and the time of the session (minimum 2 days), participants had been asked to take photographs representing things that reminded them of their goals. This method proved to be unsuccessful for our first two participants. The first participant was confused over the assignment and took only one photo, while the second mentioned that they did not use visual aids to remind them of goals, thus the assignment did not fit their experience. Due to our participants' feedback, we did not ask the rest of our participants to complete the task. Our interviews took place from May 12 to May 24, each interview session was scheduled to be 90 minutes long and was held at the University of Washington. The interviews were led by a moderator, while notes and time were taken by a notetaker. Additionally, we recorded the interviews so that we could gather better observational data.

During the session, we interviewed participants about their long-term goals and asked them to complete two activities related to their goals. The interview started with some background questions to get to know our participants and afterward we asked them about their photovoice findings. We then started our first activity in which participants were asked to create a list of past and present long and short term goals. After the exercise was completed, we asked to follow up questions and asked our participants to walk us through their list. Then we asked our participants to draw a timeline of their most relevant past or present long-term goal and asked follow-up questions after the activity. At the end of the interview, we asked more broad and general questions.

Analysis

We followed the grounded theory approach to analyze our findings. Our initial analysis involved meeting as a team and discussing the most recent interview. To establish a good understanding of the topic, the researchers that were not present during the interview were asked to watch the videos recorded and take notes of any interesting points. This analysis proved to be very surface level and focused on the actions of participants, so we took an alternative approach that would yield better insights.

We assigned two participants to every one researcher, tasking them with becoming a "knowledge expert" of two of the participant's experiences. This technique was used to shorten the time needed for analysis while also being reliable since two researchers would have a very deep understanding of each participants experience. After watching the videos we wrote memos that contained our first level of codes individually and met as a group to continue the analysis. Before discussing the memos we added our initial codes to a spreadsheet that connected them with relevant quotes and observations. Afterward, we wrote our initial codes on sticky notes and grouped them in an affinity diagram based on the participant that mentioned the information. We then wrote overarching titles for the different code groupings, which became our focused codes. Those focus codes were then written on sticky notes and grouped in a larger affinity diagram that included all of the participants' information. The grouped information was then given a title to describe the focus codes which became our theoretical codes. Through discussing our theoretical codes we determined that there are a strong correlation between long term goals, plans, and emotions and we created our theoretical model.
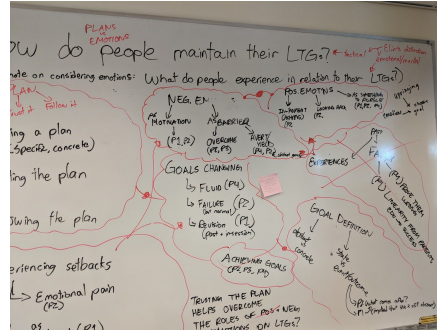
Image 1: Focus Codes

Image 2: Theoretical Codes

Findings

Primary goals that were discussed by each participant are indicated in Table 1 below.

Participant ID	P1	P2	P3	P4
Main Goal Discussed	Launch/stabilize a UX career	Complete a marathon	Be hired as a software engineer	Be hired as a design manager

Table 1: Primary goals discussed by each participant during the interview

During the discussions of these goals, a tension emerged between plans and emotions in the experience of long-term goal maintenance, as depicted in our theoretical model. (See Figure 1.) Plans, in general, were discussed by participants in the context of supporting and directing their efforts toward achieving their goals. Emotions could broadly be categorized as positive or negative, and our analysis showed that they played a wide variety of roles, as motivators, barriers, and more. "Trusting the plan" seemed to play a role in navigating the tension between plans and emotions. We discuss these emergent roles and relationships in further detail below.
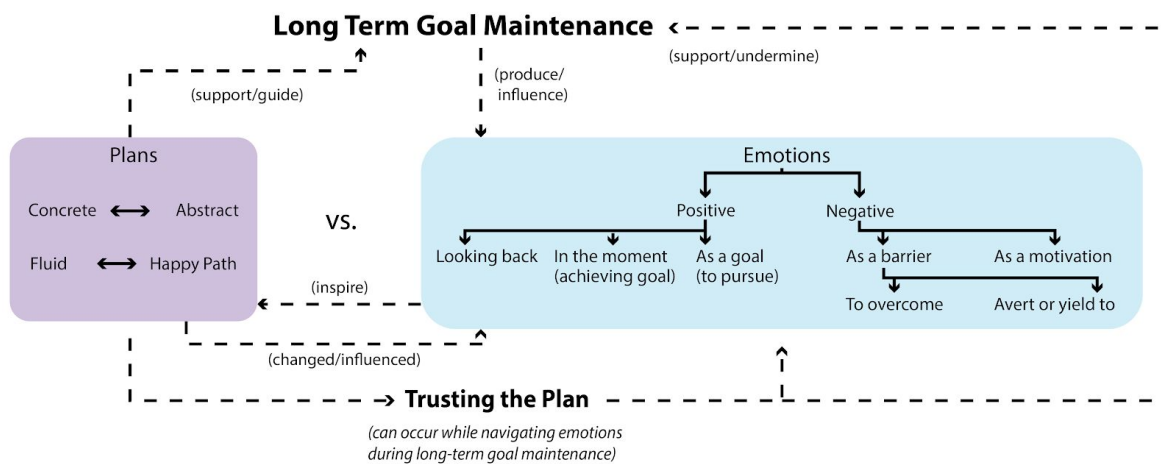

Figure 1: Model of theory of plans vs emotions

Concrete vs Abstract Goal

The concrete vs. abstract goal code emerged after discussing the success metrics for each participant. We have defined a concrete goal as a goal that has a clear endpoint and formal success metrics, while an abstract goal has an unclear success metric and may rely on a general feeling.

Concrete goal examples can be seen in P2, P3 and P4's long term goal experiences, and are contrasted by P1's experience. For example, P2's past long term goal was to complete a marathon without injury. Their success metric for the final goal was to be able to complete a run a few days after the marathon. This is similar to P3's past long term goal, which was to "get a job by the end of March 2019" and their final success metric was to get a job offer. P4 on the other hand, discussed a present long term goal with us and the steps they have taken to get there. Their long term goal is to become a design manager and they defined their end success metric as at least having a larger stake in projects and mentoring a team of designers.

P1 discussed their present goal with us during the timeline activity but as we continued the interview, they iterated on their end goal and their success metrics were defined as a feeling. At the beginning of the timeline exercise, they mentioned that they wanted to "launch a UX career" and midway through the interview they redefined that idea as "establish or stabilize a UX career". Additionally, we also found their success criteria to be more abstract as well since their definition of professional success was when their "average job satisfaction reaches a certain point of stabilization" or a state of comfort. P1 noted that they could not say if they will "succeeded 100% in that, simply because things are constantly changing".

Fluid vs. Ideal Plan

This code emerged based on the observation of our participants' considerations of their goals not being reached. We describe a plan as being "fluid" when a participant is willing to pivot or change their goal if it were unmet in the intended time frame. As opposed to an "ideal" plan, which is one where it does not take setbacks into account or the goal stays the same no matter happens to the plan.

The participants we observed having ideal plans were P1, P2, and P3. The long term goal P1 chose to elaborate on was to "stabilize/establish/launch a UX career". Even though they had changed their professional goals before landing on their current one, they were confident in their current choice by saying, "Back then I didn't necessarily know what I want to do with my life... now because I do have work experience, in that I'm more comfortable knowing that like ok this is what I wanna do." P2 had a strict view of plans and goals. They expressed that "a changed goal feels like a failure, not in a 'fail forward' kind of way, like 'it makes you a lesser person' failure." P3 shared a goal that had a strict timeline of finding a software job due to financial concerns. They mentioned that even if they didn't reach their goal, they would continue to apply to software jobs while sustaining themself with a service job.

P4 had a fluid plan, in that they were flexible to the definition of the milestones that would progress their towards their goal of becoming a design manager. An example of that is when they thought about delaying or changing their career plan if they had not achieved their goal by a certain age as they

planned on having kids by 35.

Positive Emotions

We observed that positive emotions from our participants past reinforces their motivating to work on their goals. It was especially prevalent in P2, who loves to run. Their past accomplishment of completing a marathon boosted their confidence to do so again. They stated, "I just loved how I felt after completing my first marathon," which motivated them to do another marathon. They also had confidence in their training journey because they stated, "I knew I have done it, so if I do the same thing again, I can do it." This gives them the drive to sign up for more ambitious marathons in the future, such as their ultimate running goal: the Boston Marathon.

Negative Emotions as Barriers & Motivations

When it comes to negative emotions, participants perceived this has either a barrier to their long-term goal maintenance, which they had to overcome or in some cases yield to it and avert from the goal.

P4 discussed how "failing to keep up" with one of their goals, which was related to pursuing their passion for dancing, ultimately led to them abandoning the goal. They couldn't manage to progress in the same way as their other fellow dancers were, which gave rise to feelings of disappointment. This barrier of feeling low and not ready enough to progress towards the goal inadvertently made the participant give priority to other purposes in life. In contrast, other participants saw these barriers as a hurdle to overcome. P2, during a marathon run, mentioned "feels like crap" and "the brain wants you to go even if the body is in pain" – using negative emotions even if it's in the moment, as a challenge or hurdle that they have to overcome.

As motivators, negative emotions also play an integral part in pushing one towards maintaining and progressing towards a goal. P1 said "discouragement from setbacks motivates me" which also led to re-examining their tactics to achieve a particular goal. While P2 mentioned "shame works for me"- this emotion was pushed onto them by an app, that in turn motivated them to complete a particular task. Participants also said that "fear" from past failures and experiences serve up as a good reminder which motivates them further. P1 exclusively mentions "guilt of wasting a day" pushes them further to achieve the milestone which was set in order to complete a goal. P3 explained how "fear of not having a job" pushes them every day to complete daily tasks that will ultimately help to achieve the goal that has been set. They use these negative emotions as triggers which held them accountable for working towards the progress of a particular goal.

"Trust the plan"

Getting to the direct tension of Plans vs Emotions, this tension was reflected to some degree in all of our participants, but especially P2, who explicitly used the words "trust the plan" as their mantra and wrote it in all-caps above part of the timeline they drew. They discussed how trusting the plan helped them know when not to listen to themself, using the phrase, "The plan knows better than I do" (though there was the caveat that they would disregard their plan if they could sense that they might be injuring themself). For P2 in particular, the moments that we coded as overcoming the barriers of negative emotions were observed to have occurred around the moments of their discussion of trusting the plan.

Supporting this notion, P3 and P4 also discussed experiences when they followed their plans despite experiencing setbacks or negative emotions and eventually reached their goals. While these participants didn't use the same mantra, we observed similar qualities to P2's experience of trusting the plan,

particularly in how following their plans helped overcome mental states that might otherwise have been experienced as barriers. Based on our analysis, trusting one's plan might be the "active ingredient" in navigating the collision between plans and emotions during the process of long-term goal maintenance.

Limitations

Although our analysis of our 4 participants revealed the tension of plans vs. emotions, with more time and participants, we would be able to continue revising our interview sessions and further support our tension and theory. We would also like to ask to follow up questions to our participants from the perspective of the tension and theory. Since we are using Grounded Theory, we feel like we are only scratching the surface by having just enough findings to point us to our theory.

2 out of 4 participants are University of Washington graduate students. Due to the limited time of the study and the bandwidth of the researchers, it was easier to recruit our academic peers. Ideally, we would have liked to recruit more diverse participants. By doing so, we could explore how people in different stages of their lives and careers experience tension.

Discussion

Through our research, a theory of *Plans vs Emotions in Long-Term Goal Maintenance* emerged. While discussing their experiences with long-term goals in our interviews and engaging in reflective activities, participants reported having followed a plan (for past goals) or having a plan in mind (for current goals), at least for the goals that were being primarily discussed.

One of the original objectives of our research was to uncover opportunities to support people in maintaining their long-term goals, and we discovered that long-term goal maintenance might be enhanced by "trusting the plan." Based on our findings, it is possible that generally trusting one's plan (but also knowing when not to trust one's plan) is helpful for distinguishing between circumstances when one should navigate their goal pursuits emotionally and when one should navigate their goal pursuits tactically (disregarding or overcoming their emotions). In this way, trusting one's plan might be a way to increase the likelihood of achieving one's goals. Further research is necessary to iterate upon and strengthen the current theory, including research that explores "trusting the plan" in more detail. If the theory is further supported, then the next step would be to identify specific ways to promote the formation of plans and the development of trust in those plans.

What is known...	What this study adds...
- People engage in setting long-term goals to direct their behavior, experiencing varying levels of success in achieving their goals. - There exist people who would like to be more effective in pursuing their goals. - As noted in Goal-Setting Theory, defining goals specifically and concretely seems to lead to the goal being more likely to be achieved.	- Supports some aspects of goal-setting theory and contributes a new theory that begins to account for emotional aspects of long-term goal maintenance. - Identifies a possible opportunity to enhance long-term goal maintenance through "trusting the plan. - Identifies an additional opportunity for future research to explore how goals are revised or replaced, possible in the

	context of personal reflection.

To further explore the role of "trusting the plan" in long-term goal maintenance, questions that might be worth investigating include: (1) In what ways do people experience "trusting the plan" (if at all)? (2) How do people experience positive and negative emotions while "trusting the plan"? (3) How do people experience the perceived effects of "trusting the plan"? Purposive sampling to recruit participants who not only possess a long-term goal but also possess a plan toward that goal would help answer these questions.

Finally, while it wasn't relevant to our main research question, our research also uncovered an opportunity to challenge our assumption that maintaining goals is inherently positive. Revising goals and forming new goals entirely occurred for each of our participants. (In P1's case, they found themselves revising their goal in the middle of the interview session from vaguely "launching a career" to more specifically "stabilizing a career and feeling satisfied," possibly as a result of in-session reflection.) This might suggest a need to further investigate the experiences when goals are revised or replaced. Possible future research questions include: (1) How do people explain and perceive changes in their long-term goals? (2) How might changes in long-term goals be adaptive? (3) How do these changes occur in the context of reflecting on one's goals?

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Author Contributions Page

Jenn Chan

I facilitated our virtual team sync up meetings and scheduled in-person meetings on campus. I also contributed to the draft of the study, including the participant activity and the timing of the sessions. I recruited some of our participants and conducted two of the four research sessions. I wrote detailed memos and did extensive analysis for P1and P3. I participated in our coding meeting and the creation of our presentation slides.

Mitchell Fajardo

Aside from general contributions throughout the quarter, I specifically served as an in-session notetaker for P1 and reviewed the other participants' recording to take notes. In our second round of analysis, I revisited P2's data for more extensive analysis. In the process of identifying our initial codes and focused codes and then moving into theoretical coding, I was the initiator for developing the theoretical model to illustrate the observed tension between plans and emotions in long-term goal maintenance.

Stefania Gueorguieva

I recruited one of our participants (P2) and served as a moderator for that interview, as well as served as an in-session notetaker for P3 and P4's interviews. I participated in our initial analysis of the data and came up with our second level of analysis, where two researchers were assigned to become knowledge experts of two participant's experiences. I revisited P1 and P4's data for more extensive analysis and participated in our coding meeting where we created our theoretical model. I also partook in the creation of our presentation slides and visual diagram.

Saurabh Phadnis

I helped in recruiting one of our participants (P4) and served as the moderator for the interview. I also served as a note-taker for P2's interview. Aside from watching all interview sessions, for our analysis, I revisited P2 and P4's data for more extensive understanding. I participated in the process of coding where we identified our initial codes and focus codes resulting into our theoretical model.