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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073915586228>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-119145>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Isaacowitz, Derek M; Freund, Alexandra M (2016). Comment: emotion, goals, and distance: a view from the study of adult development and aging. *Emotion Review*, 8(2):132-133.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073915586228>

RUNNING HEAD: View from Aging

Comment: Emotion, Goals and Distance: A View from the Study of Adult Development
and Aging

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In press: Emotion Review

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This comment was written during a sabbatical at the Columbia Aging Center,
Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA, supported by grant IZK0Z1_154993/1
by the Swiss National Foundation.

Abstract

In this commentary, we consider how Balcetis' proposals may interface with the study of motivation and emotion in life-span developmental psychology, pointing to open questions regarding the distance perception of long-term chronic goals as well as age-related shifts from informational to emotional goals.

Keywords: aging, motivation, long-term goals

Emotion, Goals and Distance: A View from the Study of Adult Development and Aging

As life-span developmental psychologists interested in emotion-motivation links, we agree with Balciotis' (this volume) assertion that goals generally, and approach/avoidance specifically, are important for understanding emotion. In our commentary, we offer some thoughts from viewing the work through the lens of adult development and aging (e.g., Isaacowitz, 2012; Freund, Mustafic, & Hennecke, 2012). Our overarching theme is that the framework applies well to short-term, situational goals, but seems less well-suited to the long-term, chronic goals investigated in life-span development research.

What kind of goals?

The paper focuses on relatively short-term motivational states – for example, wanting to approach something appealing or avoid something disgusting. Clearly, these short-term motivational states are relevant to transient emotional experiences, making it interesting to know how they influence emotions and motivated cognition (i.e., distance perception).

In contrast to such short-term goals, the goals most relevant in adult development are highly abstract, closer to life goals or developmental tasks (e.g., Freund, 2007) rather than very concrete goals specific to a situation. Such goals are establishing a family in young adulthood, caring for the next generation in middle adulthood, and maintaining independence in daily living in older adulthood. These goals – both the means involved and the ends that people want to attain or avoid - are typically not located in space. To be affected by the processes laid out by Balciotis, they need to be broken down into more

concrete subgoals. For instance, the goal to maintain independence might best be achieved by staying healthy; this might encompass the subgoal of eating healthily with the means of not eating chocolate. The goal to avoid chocolate might lead to the perception of chocolate as being placed further away which might help to ward off the temptation triggered by the “hot” visceral aspects associated with chocolate. However, only by breaking down goals to a very concrete level does Balci et al.’s framework connect with developmental goals. Higher-order goals such as being healthy are not located in space.

At the same time, the view from adult development suggests that longer-term, chronic goals may be especially important in terms of distance perception and emotion, in particular maintenance and avoidance of loss goals (as opposed to growth goals), and emotion regulation/hedonic goals (as opposed to information-seeking goals).

Across adulthood, gains in resources decrease and losses increase (Baltes, 1997). In line with these changes, there is a shift from a predominant goal orientation towards gains and growth in younger adults to a stronger orientation towards maintenance and the avoidance of loss (Freund et al., 2012). Maintenance goals imply that the person has already achieved what they want to keep: there is no distance between the desired end state and the actual state, making it difficult to apply Balci et al.’s framework to these goals. Given the importance maintenance goals have for middle-aged and older adults, this is a significant limitation of the framework as applied to developmental questions.

According to Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST, Carstensen, Charles, & Isaacowitz, 1999), changes in time perspective lead to shifts in goals: when people perceive their time as open-ended (as young adults do) they prioritize future-oriented

goals, but when time is perceived as limited (typically by older adults), they prioritize present-oriented, hedonic goals. Moreover, SST posits that chronic pro-hedonic goals lead older adults to show “positivity effects” in their attention and memory, such that they preferentially process positive over negative information (Reed & Carstensen, 2012). Putting these assumptions into Balcetis’ framework leads to interesting research questions that might inform both fields - motivated cognition as well as adult development: If emotional goals lead people to preferentially process positive information, how might that intersect with the goals-emotion-distance interface presented by Balcetis? Would chronic emotional goals constrain temporary goals? Might age-related changes in how goals and emotion relate change distance perception as well? Considering which of the observed patterns from this article do (and do not) vary as a function of aging would offer critical tests of which relationships are fundamental and which shift under varying higher-order goal conditions.

Conclusions

From a lifespan developmental perspective, key goals are long-term and help in the construction of meaningful lives given environmental constraints (Freund, 2007). We believe that Balcetis’ approach will prove fruitful if expanded to also apply to long-term goals and the dimension of maintenance, rather than focusing exclusively on short-term concrete approach and avoidance goals.

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