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## Inspired to get there: The effects of trait and goal inspiration on goal progress

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### ABSTRACT

The present investigation examined the effects of trait and goal inspiration on goal progress. Undergraduate students reported three goals they intended to pursue throughout the semester and completed measures of trait and goal inspiration as well as measures of personality traits. Participants then reported on goal progress three times at monthly intervals throughout the semester. Result showed that trait inspiration predicted goal progress, and that this effect was fully mediated by goal inspiration and held after controlling for the Big Five personality traits. Additional within-person analyses of goal inspiration showed that most of the variance in goal inspiration was due to between-person individual differences. Furthermore, analyses of the direction of causality between goal inspiration and goal progress revealed a bi-directional relationship. Discussion focused on the implications and future directions for research on inspiration.

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## 1. Introduction

If you are inspired to pursue a goal, will you be more likely to accomplish it? Setting personal goals can assist people in organizing and enhancing their lives through directing attention and action, thereby enabling forward movement and growth. In the area of psychology, hundreds of studies have investigated goal pursuit, looking for characteristics both of the individual and of the goals themselves which enable successful progress towards accomplishing these goals. In the present study, we focus on inspiration as a heretofore unexamined construct in the study of goal pursuit, and propose that people high on trait inspiration are more likely to set inspired goals, which in turn are more likely to be attained.

### 1.1. Inspiration

Inspiration has been commonly defined as a mental process meant to achieve a higher state of knowledge or wisdom, or as an occurrence at the moment when one finds the means to translate a creative idea into something concrete (Hart, 1998). Although the field of motivation and personality psychology has mostly ignored inspiration as a psychological construct, recent studies by Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) and Thrash, Maruskin, Cassidy, and Elliot (2010) have begun to lift inspiration out of obscurity and into mainstream empirical psychology. In their research, Thrash and Elliot conceptualize inspiration using three common

characteristics. The first is evocation, stipulating that inspiration is brought on by some idea or person instead of occurring without any apparent cause. The second is transcendence, which posits that inspiration brings about an awareness of something that is better or more important than one's usual concerns. The third is referred to as motivation, meaning that inspiration energizes and drives behavior (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

In a novel approach to inspiration, Thrash and Elliot conceptualized it not only as a state but also as a personality trait, suggesting that some people are generally more inspired than others (2003). Research has linked trait inspiration with the behavioral activation system inherent in approach motivation, as well as with intrinsic motivation, absorption, creativity, and experiential processing, among others (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Finally, prospective studies have shown that trait inspiration influences well-being by enhancing feelings of purpose in life and gratitude (Thrash et al., 2010).

The relationship between inspiration and well-being has thus far been shown to be mediated by reports of greater purpose in life and more gratitude, but these are both more attitudinal rather than behavioral. Given that inspiration is thought to energize and drive behavior, and people are often inspired "to" act or to do something (Thrash & Elliot, 2004), it is likely that inspiration could play a more active role in altering goal striving behavior. In particular, given the conceptualization of inspiration as related to motivation, it is possible that trait inspiration is directly related to goal pursuit and attainment.

### 1.2. Goal pursuit

One of the main ways in which people motivate themselves to act is through setting and then pursuing important personal goals.

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Such personal goals or strivings are those which people try to achieve through their everyday behavior (Emmons, 1986), and could include anything from health-related goals like exercising more often to social goals like keeping in touch with old friends. While personal goal setting is extremely common, goal attainment is not (Koestner, 2008; Norcross & Vangarelli, 1988). This is mainly due to lack of goal specificity, failure to monitor progress, and limited self-regulatory strength (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Positive goal progress, on the other hand, has been related to goal autonomy (Koestner, 2008; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), invested effort (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and setting of implementation intentions (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), as well as to certain general personality traits. In particular, research on the Big Five personality traits and goal pursuit has shown that conscientiousness is positively related to goal setting and performance (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993; Judge & Ilies, 2002). Additionally, neuroticism was found to be negatively related, and extraversion positively related to goal pursuit (Judge & Ilies, 2002; Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992).

Successful goal pursuit is also dependent on particular properties of the goals themselves. For example, goals set in supportive domains are more likely to be attained (Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011), as are goals that are more self-concordant (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). While some of these goal properties are completely goal or situation-specific, others derive in part from the trait characteristics of the person setting the goal. As an example, people high on achievement motivation are more likely to successfully reach their goals, in part because they set more mastery-oriented goals in the first place (Elliot & Church, 1997). We believe that inspiration could play a similar dual role in goal progress, with trait inspiration affecting goal pursuit through goal inspiration.

### 1.3. Goal inspiration

In addition to looking at inspiration as a trait or state, researchers have also examined inspiration for personal goals by asking participants the extent to which they were inspired to pursue their personal strivings (Thrash et al., 2010, study 2). In that study, Thrash et al. (2010) found that goal inspiration was correlated with trait inspiration and predicted changes in positive affect and vitality over and above trait inspiration. Interestingly, they justified using goal inspiration to account for possible shared method and construct variance, and treated the two types of inspiration as separate correlated variables (Thrash et al., 2010). However, goal-specific inspiration can differ among goals, such that John may be extremely inspired by his goal of learning to play guitar but much less so by his goal of keeping his apartment clean (even if this second goal may be more important to him). Such differences in goal inspiration could only occur if goal inspiration was based in large part on specific characteristics of the goal. However, given that trait inspiration has been linked with daily experiences of inspiration, such that people who are higher in trait inspiration experience greater inspiration on a day-to-day basis (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), it is also theoretically likely that trait inspiration is, at least in part, a direct predictor of goal inspiration, such that those who are higher in trait inspiration set more inspired goals.

Goal inspiration could in turn drive an individual to pursue and achieve desired outcomes by making them more open to novel experiences and more aware of the processes necessary for making progress, which reflects the transcendence characteristic of inspiration. More importantly, goal inspiration can also energize people in their efforts to succeed, as reflected by inspiration's motivational characteristic. We thus expect that goal inspiration would predict goal progress, and would also serve to mediate the proposed pathway between trait inspiration and goal progress.

Although we hypothesized that goal inspiration drives goal progress, it is also possible that the causation works in the other direction, such that greater initial goal progress causes people to be more inspired to further strive for these goals. Even more likely, there may be a bi-directional relationship, such that goal progress and goal inspiration build on each other to create an 'upward spiral' (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) of successful goal pursuit.

### 1.4. Present study

The present study had two hypotheses. First, we expected that trait inspiration predicts goal progress (Hypothesis 1), and then that this process is mediated by goal inspiration (Hypothesis 2). Trait inspiration and goal inspiration for three personally important goals were assessed at the start of a semester in undergraduate student participants, who then reported on their goal progress throughout the semester. Since trait inspiration has been found to correlate with many of the Big Five personality traits (Thrash et al., 2010), which have in turn been associated with successful goal pursuit (e.g. Little et al., 1992), we controlled for these to ensure that the effects of trait inspiration on goal progress are not driven by these important personality traits. Additionally, we were interested in better understanding the construct of goal inspiration. Since each participant reported on goal inspiration for three goals, we were able to look within-person at the proportion of the variance in goal inspiration that is explained between-persons rather than within-person (between goals). Finally, we wanted to examine the direction of causality, to investigate the two alternate possibilities that progress influences goal inspiration rather than vice versa, and that there is a bi-directional relationship.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 193 undergraduate students, recruited through online classified advertisements for McGill and Concordia Universities, as well as from a paid participant pool at McGill University, to participate in a study about goal setting. The study consisted of an initial lab visit as well as three online follow-ups. During the lab session, which took up to 1.5 h, participants completed a questionnaire about their goals as well as various measures of personality. Follow-up questionnaires assessing goal progress were then sent out every 4 weeks, and each took about 20 min to complete. At each follow-up, participants were sent an email which included a link to the survey as well as a reminder of the goals that he or she had listed in the initial questionnaire. Participants were compensated with \$20 after the initial baseline survey and with another \$20 after they had completed all three online follow-ups, for a total of \$40 per participant. One hundred and seventy-six participants (120 female, 36 male, 20 did not report gender) ages 18–35 ( $M = 20.16$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ) completed at least one of the three follow-ups.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Trait inspiration

Trait inspiration was measured during the initial survey using the Inspiration Scale developed by Thrash and Elliot (2003). It contains four stem statements (Eg. "I feel inspired"), each followed by a frequency item (i.e. "how often does this happen?") and an intensity item ("how deeply or strongly [in general]?"), for a total of eight items. For this study, a mean of all eight items was used as a measure of trait inspiration. The internal consistency for this scale was high,  $\alpha = .90$ .

### 2.2.2. Big Five personality traits

We assessed the Big Five traits using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) which includes only two items for each trait. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 7 (*Agree Strongly*), and each subscale was calculated by taking the mean of the two items. Although the internal consistencies of the subscales are quite low (ranging from .35 to .75 in our study), this is similar to results obtained by Gosling et al. (2003) and is expected given that the TIPI was designed to emphasize content validity rather than internal consistency. However, the TIPI has been shown to have good convergence with other more commonly used Big Five measures, as well as good test–retest reliability (Gosling et al., 2003). We used this measure in the current study to avoid overburdening participants.

### 2.2.3. Goal descriptions

Participants were asked to list three personal, short-term goals which they intended to pursue during the semester. The instructions for nominating personal goals were taken directly from previous research on goals (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, 2008) and read as follows: “Personal goals are projects and concerns that people think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete or succeed at. They may be more or less difficult to implement; require only a few or a complex sequence of steps; represent different areas of a person’s life; and be more or less time consuming, attractive, or urgent. Please think of three personal goals that you plan to carry out this semester.” Examples of our participants’ goals include “Get all A’s”, “Find a long-term girlfriend”, “Sleep more”, and “join the newspaper”.

### 2.2.4. Goal inspiration

Goal inspiration was assessed at baseline and at the second follow-up using two items per goal (“how inspiring is this goal to you?” and “how inspired are you to pursue and reach this goal?”), on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true to 7 = extremely true). The items for each goal were correlated at  $r = .75$  or greater ( $ps < .001$ ). A mean of the two items for each goal (for a total of six items) was used as an index of goal inspiration,  $\alpha = .80$  at baseline and  $\alpha = .78$  at the follow-up.

### 2.2.5. Goal progress

At the follow-up surveys, participants were asked to rate how much progress they had made toward their short-term goals using two items (“I have made a lot of progress toward this goal” and “I feel like I am on track with my goal plan”) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. At the final follow-up, a third item was added (“I feel like I have achieved this goal”). A mean of all the items for each goal and at each follow-up was used as an index of overall goal progress ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents the summary statistics and zero-order correlations for all the study variables. Trait inspiration was significantly positively correlated with openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness and extraversion but not with emotional stability (the inverse of neuroticism). Goal inspiration was positively correlated with trait inspiration,  $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ . Goal progress was positively correlated with both trait and goal inspiration.

### 3.2. Central analyses

To test our first hypothesis that trait inspiration predicts goal progress, we regressed overall goal progress (averaged across the three goals and the three follow-ups) on trait inspiration in a second step of a hierarchical regression, after first controlling for the Big Five personality traits (see Table 2 for full results). Results showed that trait inspiration was a significant predictor of goal progress,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .05$  and explained three percent of the variance in goal progress ( $R^2 = .12$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $\Delta F(1,169) = 5.72$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition to trait inspiration, extraversion significantly predicted goal progress ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and conscientiousness marginally so ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .06$ ).

To test whether this relationship between trait inspiration and goal progress is mediated by goal inspiration, we used the methods outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to assess indirect effects in mediator models, controlling for the Big Five personality traits in the analysis. Using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) macro for SPSS, we estimated 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effect using bootstrapping re-sampling ( $k = 5000$ ) procedures. Result first showed that trait inspiration was a significant predictor of goal inspiration,  $b = .46$  ( $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There was also a significant direct effect of goal inspiration on goal progress  $b = .24$  ( $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The direct effect of trait inspiration on goal progress in the full mediation analysis was reduced to  $b = .08$  ( $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .35$ ), suggesting full mediation. The indirect effect of trait inspiration on goal progress through goal inspiration was  $.11$  ( $SE = .04$ ), and the bootstrapped 95% CI estimates did not include zero (.04–.20).

### 3.3. Within-person analyses of goal inspiration

In order to better understand the extent to which goal inspiration is related to trait characteristics, we explored the within-person relationship between the different goals by computing the proportion of the variance in goal inspiration explained at the within-person level. Using HLM software, version 6.06, we ran a 2-level unconditional model for goal inspiration where goals were nested within individuals, with no predictor variables specified at any level. Testing such a model allows us to look at the proportion of the variance in the outcome which is explained at each level (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Results showed that only 35% of the variance on goal inspiration is within person (between goals), while the remainder (65%) was due to individual differences between participants. People thus tend to report similar levels of inspiration for all of their goals, suggesting that it really is certain people who set more inspired goals than others and that a person’s goals are much more similar to their other goals on inspiration than they are to other people’s goals.

### 3.4. Direction of causality

To test the direction of the causation between goal inspiration and goal progress, we performed two regressions. First, to determine whether goal progress can predict goal inspiration, we regressed goal inspiration assessed at the second follow-up on baseline goal inspiration and goal progress assessed at the first follow-up. Both were significant predictors of follow-up goal inspiration,  $\beta = .53$ ,  $p < .001$  for baseline goal inspiration and  $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$  for goal progress. Next, we regressed goal progress at the final follow-up on goal progress and goal inspiration assessed at the second follow-up. Again in this analysis both of the predictors were significant,  $\beta = .62$ ,  $p < .001$  for goal progress, and  $\beta = .15$ ,  $p = .05$  for goal inspiration. Taken together, the results from these two regressions show a reciprocal relationship, such that goal inspiration influences future goal progress, but making progress on one’s goal also affect future ratings of goal inspiration.

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations and correlations of study variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Extraversion	4.51	1.27	–						
2. Agreeableness	4.92	1.07	.05	–					
3. Conscientiousness	5.10	1.21	.14 <sup>†</sup>	.19 <sup>*</sup>	–				
4. Emotional stability	4.54	1.37	.16 <sup>*</sup>	.28 <sup>**</sup>	.07	–			
5. Openness to experience	5.49	1.04	.30 <sup>**</sup>	.25 <sup>*</sup>	.09	.18 <sup>*</sup>	–		
6. Trait inspiration	4.76	1.06	.32 <sup>**</sup>	.18 <sup>*</sup>	.22 <sup>*</sup>	.11	.41 <sup>**</sup>	–	
7. Goal inspiration	5.38	1.00	.10	.26 <sup>**</sup>	.15 <sup>*</sup>	.19 <sup>*</sup>	.23 <sup>*</sup>	.50 <sup>**</sup>	–
8. Goal progress	4.64	1.03	.25 <sup>*</sup>	.04	.24 <sup>*</sup>	.10	.07	.26 <sup>*</sup>	.29 <sup>**</sup>

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ .

<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**  
Regression coefficients of goal progress on personality variables.

Predictors	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
1. Extraversion	.14 (.06)	.18	2.26 <sup>*</sup>
2. Agreeableness	–.02 (.08)	–.03	–.32
3. Conscientiousness	.12 (.06)	.14	1.90 <sup>†</sup>
4. Emotional stability	.05 (.06)	.06	.83
5. Openness to experience	–.08 (.08)	–.08	–.96
6. Trait inspiration	.19 (.08)	.20	2.39 <sup>*</sup>

$F(6, 169) = 3.94, p < .01$

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The present study examined the effects of both trait and goal inspiration on goal progress. Results supported both hypotheses, showing that trait inspiration predicted better goal progress, and that this effect was fully mediated by goal inspiration. Indeed, people who were generally more inspired also tended to set inspired goals, which were then more likely to be successfully pursued. This effect held after controlling for other personality traits, namely the Big Five, some of which were previously linked to goal progress (Judge & Ilies, 2002; Little et al., 1992). Additionally, we showed that although goal inspiration did predict subsequent greater goal progress, this relationship was reciprocal, such that goal progress also predicted future goal inspiration.

Overall, the current study furthers research on inspiration by focusing on an active behavioral outcome, namely goal pursuit. Although we did not examine well-being directly in this manuscript, previous research has consistently linked goal progress with enhanced well-being (e.g. Brunstein, 1993; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). It could be that inspired people not only experience more purpose in life and more gratitude (Thrash et al., 2010), but also set and pursue more inspired goals which they are then more likely to achieve, resulting in enhanced well-being. Goal progress could thus be another mediator through which trait inspiration influences well being; future studies are needed to directly test this hypothesis.

A novel approach in our study was the deconstruction of goal inspiration to separate the within and between person effects. Our analyses of within person effects showed an unusually low level of variation among goals (35%), suggesting that people tend to report similar levels of inspiration for all their goals. This is quite different from what has been found in previous studies with goal level measures. For example, Milyavskaya and Koestner (2011) found 72% variability in goal self-concordance and 83% in goal progress at the goal level. The low between-goal variability in goal inspiration suggests that goal inspiration is akin to a trait measure. There has been some theoretical discussion regarding the practice of aggregating goal measures and using them as personality or trait

measures (e.g. Sheldon & Elliot, 2000); our results suggest that this is a viable option for goal inspiration. It is also worth noting that our measure of goal inspiration shares 25% of the variance with trait inspiration (based on the correlation of  $r = .50$ ), suggesting that additional factors may be responsible for the high level of overlap between a person's ratings of their three goals. Future research can look at other predictors of goal inspiration, both between person and between goals.

Another important future direction would be to investigate the processes by which goal inspiration leads to goal progress. Many factors have previously been linked with successful goal pursuit, including self-efficacy, expanded effort, implementation intentions, autonomy, and approach (versus avoidance) orientation (e.g. Bandura, 1997; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Koestner, 2008; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). While some of these could be conceptualized as consequences of goal inspiration (e.g. people put in more effort into pursuing inspired goals), the relationship with others, such as implementation intentions or approach orientation, is not so clear-cut. Future research can examine the links between goal inspiration and other goal variables to see whether there is a causal effect from one to the other, or whether they are simply overlapping constructs, and to determine their individual effects on goal pursuit and goal progress.

The current research also begins to indirectly untangle the separate processes of inspiration identified by Thrash and Elliot (2003). According to them, an individual could either be inspired "by" someone or something (i.e. related to evocation and transcendence) or be inspired "to" act or to do something (i.e. related to motivation) (see Thrash and Elliot (2004) for a discussion of these two processes). Although both these components are thought to typically co-exist in episodes of inspiration, it is likely that it is the 'inspired to' process that drives goal pursuit. Indeed, it may also be possible that the 'inspired by' process is not always present or necessary in goal inspiration. In particular, there may be instances where the inspiration to pursue a goal comes from within the person, as seems to be the case with intrinsic goals, without any outside source of inspiration. Our findings that goal inspiration is primarily a matter of trait differences suggest the possibility that some individuals are more often inspired to act intrinsically from within. Future research can examine these issues to better understand the two processes of inspiration.

Another important contribution of the present research is its examination of the direction of causality of goal inspiration and goal progress. While our initial prediction that goal inspiration influences subsequent goal progress was confirmed, we also found the opposite to be true, such that goal progress increases subsequent reports of goal inspiration. This suggests that goal progress and goal inspiration build on each other to form a cycle of greater goal inspiration and greater goal pursuit. Future research could test whether this is the case only for existing goals or for future goals as well. Indeed, just as goal achievement has been linked to setting

more self-concordant goals in the future (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) it is possible that achieving important goals makes one more inspired to set and pursue future goals. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see whether successful goal pursuit could similarly affect trait inspiration, such that people who set and pursue inspired goals and then make progress on them become generally more inspired, or whether it is confined to goals.

Several limitations exist in this study which should be addressed in future research. First, our evaluation of goal progress relied on a self-reported scale, and hence measured perceived rather than actual goal progress. A second limitation is our choice of the ten-item measure to assess personality traits. Although previous research has shown that it correlates highly with traditional personality measures (Gosling et al., 2003), it has poor internal consistency and does not assess all the facets of each Big-5 personality trait. Another limitation is our aggregation of goal-specific inspiration across all three goals, which does not take into account goal specificity, and could be responsible for the correlation of .50 with trait inspiration. Future research can examine goal-specific inspiration separately for different goals to further disentangle the effects of trait and goal-specific inspiration on goal progress.

Lastly, we did not provide a definition of inspiration before asking participants to make such ratings. Since inspiration is quite an abstract concept, the term likely has a different meaning to everyone. For example, some people may have rated common goals like improving grades as highly inspirational, while others gave comparable ratings to seemingly more lofty goals such as “finding a career path that I can devote my life to”. However, this limitation may not be exceedingly important because it is the subjective feeling that one experiences which is likely to motivate behavior. If someone does in fact feel inspired to achieve high grades, that feeling of inspiration may be the factor driving them to accomplish that goal. Thrash and Elliot (2003) also address this problem in relation to trait inspiration, positing that it may be an apparent rather than real problem since their results remained constant across studies, and were supportive of their conceptualization regardless of any differences in participants’ interpretation of inspiration.

Overall, the present study advances our existing knowledge on the role of inspiration by examining the effects of inspiration on goal pursuit. Our results showed that trait inspiration had a positive impact on goal progress, and that this relationship was fully mediated by goal inspiration. While much still remains to be understood in the link between inspiration and goal progress, this study provides preliminary evidence for the existence of this phenomenon and outlines possible directions for future research.

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