

Identity, motivation and unconscious self-control: The case of motivated implementation intentions

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1. Introduction

Contemporary social psychological research has accumulated an impressive empirical support for the advocacy of the idea that most of our life is going on in an automatic or unconscious manner (e.g. Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bargh, 1997; Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). At a glance it is a discouraging finding for human beings who are so proud of having free will, self-control, of being conscious and possessing other qualities that enable the exercise of willful control both on the self and environment. That is why many current theories of motivation and self-regulation are still placing too much emphasis on the consciousness and conscious choice (cf. Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, p. 463).

In this context, the issue of expanding and exploring processes that permit unconscious self-control is one of direct interest both for theoretical advance and of practical use. Recently a strong tradition of research is focusing on implementation intentions as a powerful self-regulatory strategy that permit efficient willful automatic goal pursuit (e.g. Gollwitzer, 1993; Gollwitzer, 1996; Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997; Brandstatter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001; Lengfelder & Gollwitzer, 2001; for extensive reviews see Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to continue to investigate some varieties of conscious goal setting people use in their daily lives for the purpose of efficient self-regulation. We are mainly concerned with exploring the ecological existence and relative efficiency of so called “motivated intentions” – intentions that are formulated by adding the “why” part to the intended action.

2. Goal intentions and implementation intentions

Traditionally theories of goal striving are mainly concerned with analyzing simple goal intentions (Brandstatter, Lengfelder & Gollwitzer, 2001). The goal intentions are conceived as commitment to reach end states without mentioning

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specific ways of goal attainment. By forming goal intentions people “translate their noncommittal desires into binding goals” (Gollwitzer, 1999, p. 494) and create a sense of obligation to reach them. The default format or basic syntax for a simple goal intention is: “I intend to reach X“ where X could be a desired performance or an outcome.

Beside goal intentions implementation intentions are “a form of planning that involves the individual’s commitment to perform a certain goal-directed behavior in response to a particular situation” (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996, 369-370). Typically the implementation intentions must respond to or have solutions for “when”, “what” and “how” questions of goal pursuit. They use to have a format of “I intend to do X when I encounter situation Y”.

The main benefit from “upgrading” goal intentions to implementation intentions is that the later pass the will to action initiation to the environmental cues therefore ensuring the automatic or strategic self-regulation (Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998). The metaphor or a general principle of “passing or delegation of control to the environment” was proposed in order to summarize the benefits of implementation intentions (e.g. Gollwitzer, 1993; Bargh, 1997). It is suggested that by forming implementation intentions people can strategically pass the conscious and effortful self-regulation of goal-directed behaviors to automatically controlled goal pursuit. In this case the goal-directed behavior is automatically triggered or controlled by selected situational cues. In the case of implementation intention we are faced with a goal-dependent automaticity (Bargh, 1989; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998).

3. Implementation intentions as mental representations

Why and how do implementation intentions facilitate action initiation and goal completion?

First of all it is supposed that implementation intentions increase the accessibility of the anticipated situation (Gollwitzer, 1993; 1996; 1999) having perceptual, attentional and mnemonic consequences that help to “get captured” by specified situational cues.

Second, the mental representation of the instrumental behavior or action is linked to the specific situation representation. This associative links facilitate automatic action initiation – action starts immediately, efficient and without conscious intent and people “get started” (Gollwitzer, 1999).

4. The strength of implementation intentions

In terms of mental representations the more powerful the situation-behavior link the more powerful the implementation intention will be. The same is true

for habits (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000). In a recent review of the implementation intention literature Gollwitzer (1999) stressed that “apparently, implementation intentions create habits” (p. 499). We highly agree with this statement and with other author’s parallels and distinctions that have been made between habits and implementation intentions (see Gollwitzer, 1999, p. 499). Here we would like only to mention that the power of the habit and the power of the implementation intentions are based on the strength of situation-behavior associative links. Therefore, in essence, fighting strong bad habits with the help of implementation intentions means to settle a more powerful situation-alternative behavior link than the old habitual behavior used to have. Keeping in mind that “the strategic act of will implied in forming implementation intentions ... is as effective in automating action initiation as the repeated and consistent practice implied in habits” (Gollwitzer, 1999, p. 499) this could be a promising enterprise.

Gollwitzer (1999) identified two main causes that jointly affect implementation intentions strength (or, in terms of mental representation, the strength of behavior-situation link):

1. The strength of commitment to the goal intention
2. The strength of commitment to the formed implementation intentions

In terms of the actions phases model (Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987) low commitment in the preactional phase is the result of weak motivation (low perceived desirability and feasibility) at the end of predecisional phase: if one choose to commit himself or herself to a goal that is not very attractive or has few chances to be actually attain or both of them, the overall commitment will also be weak. In turn, low potential motivation will cause weak or null motivational arousal (Brehm & Self, 1989) that will undermine the behavior during the action phase.

What we could do to assure a higher motivational potential and commitment for strengthening implementation intentions effects?

Before we will suggest direct solution let take a new look at the goals “syntax” or goals “format”.

5. Phrasing of goal setting

In the implementation intentions literature we could find two kinds of goal phrasing that people use spontaneously or deliberative when preparing themselves for action: goal intentions and implementation intentions.

We are suggesting that this is not the whole picture. It could be that, especially when faced with motivational and or commitment deficit, people use additional kind of goal phrasing for framing intentions. We assume that in this

last case people are trying to add the “why” answer to the yet known forms of goal-setting. Probably this helps them to “get more motivated / committed”.

We provisory named this kind of goal-setting as “**motivated intentions**” (see Table 1). It is clear from the table below that both goal intentions and implementation intentions could be rephrased as motivated goal intention and motivated implementation intention.

Table 1: Types of goal phrasing

Intention type	Format	Example
Goal intention (what)	“I intend to reach / to do X”	I intend to write a report
Implementation intention (when, where, how)	“I intend to reach / to do X when I encounter situation Y”	I intend to sit down in my room and write a report next Saturday, right after the dinner
Motivated goal intention (what + why)	“I intend to reach / to do X because Z”	I intend to write a report because I am a good student
Motivated implementation intention (when, where, how + why)	“I intend to reach / to do X when I encounter situation Y because Z”	I intend to sit down in my room and write a report next Saturday, right after the dinner. I will do this because I try to be a good student”.

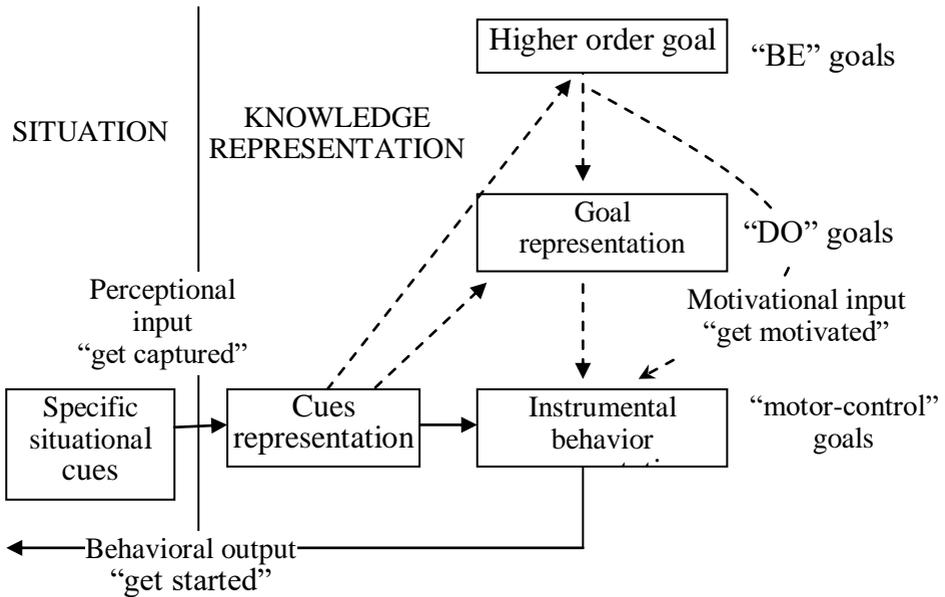
Legend:

- X = desired performance or an outcome
- Y = situational cues
- Z = motivation

6. Why should be better motivated implementation intentions?

We must return again to the issues of knowledge representation. Goals are represented mentally like other concepts (Bargh et al., 2001). On the other side, recent social psychological analysis of habits suggest that a “habit can be seen as a hierarchical mental representation in which the activation of a goal leads to activation of a number off associated behaviors lower in hierarchy” (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000, p. 54). Remembering the previously mentioned similarity between implementation intentions and habits it could be said that implementation intentions are a sort of mentally elaborated habits.

Figure 1: Implementation intentions activation



Legend:

----- association paths that are not explicit rehearsed during implementation intentions formation (in the case of motivated implementation intentions they could be used for "getting better motivated")

_____ association paths that are "mentally trained" during implementation formation

In a sense we could assume that implementation intentions are also mentally represented as a hierarchical knowledge structure. In this case when somebody encounters an appropriate situation for goal implementation due to the enhanced accessibility for relevant situational cues the goal representation will be activated automatically (quick, efficient, without conscious awareness) (see Figure 1). Activated goal representation will activate in turn instrumental behavior representation that will be transformed readily into action (behavior).

The strength of implementation intention (in terms of mental representation) could be conceived as the strength of associations between three knowledge representations: the situation-goal-instrumental behavior association strength. Unlike for the real habits we suppose that the strength of associations in the case

of implementation intentions is due to the motivational potential at the moment of mental simulation and or mental rehearsal. So far, if at the moment of the formation of the implementation intention a hierarchically superior goal is invoked / made salient through the “because” phrasing format, this will increase the motivational potential and should create stronger associative links.

This affirmation could be empirically tested comparing the occurrence and speed of the intended behavior following a simple implementation intention with the speed and occurrence of the same behavior following motivated implementation intention setting. We predict that motivated implementation intentions will be more efficient – both as occurrence and speed - and this will happen especially with counter-habitual behavior initiation. Also we think that resumption after task disruption in the case of motivated implementation intentions will be higher.

7. “Getting started” the study of motivated implementation intentions

Before starting with more rigorous laboratory experiments it would be important first to establish the ecological validity or “in the real life existence” of the motivated intentions. This is very important because we do not like to impose a normative, only theoretical grounded, view on the motivated intentions. We would also like to look for a comparative occurrence and efficiency of motivated implementation intentions as compared with implementation intentions or simple intentions.

Therefore we intend to follow closely the empirical path of the first two studies presented in the work of Gollwitzer & Brandstätter (1997). Both studies are field studies: the first one is a correlational study and the second is experimental.

H1: In their daily life people do form spontaneous motivated goal intentions and motivated implementation intentions

This kind of general hypothesis is important to verify empirically because of the “ecological” reasons: if people do not apply for motivated goal setting strategies it would be a kind of “normative fiction” we will search to confirm in further research.

H2: Motivated goal intentions and motivated implementation intentions are more frequently used spontaneously for goals that are difficult or very difficult to attain

As we mentioned before, answering to the question “why” should provide additional motivational potential for both goal intentions and implementation

intentions. We assume that this motivated goal setting strategy is a self-regulatory tool used mainly in the case of perceived or expected difficulties for goal attainment or and in the case of low goal commitment. We would like to have also a kind of ecological validity for this hypothesis too.

Indirect support for the hypothesis that perceived goal difficulty will force subjects to use motivated goal setting strategies we find in the study of Gollwitzer & Brandstätter (1997). In their first study authors find no significant impact of implementation intentions on successful easy-to-implement goals. A qualitative analysis of goals content suggests that in the case of easy-to-implement goals 8.2% were career related, 55.3% lifestyle related and 36.5% cover interpersonal issues. As the authors mention it could be that easy-to-implement goals are more related to already habitualized actions so no real need to form implementation intention exist. People simply decide to do what they usually use to do. We assume that in the case of easy-to-implement goals people will use mainly simple goal intention statements. A direct test of this idea wasn't provided by Gollwitzer & Brandstätter (1997; study 1) and we think this happened only because participants were asked only about whether they had formed implementation intentions. We are going to correct this in our modified replication of this study.

On the other side, when intended goals are difficult-to-implement (52.9% of this goals were career related, 31.4% life style related and only 15.7% interpersonal related) we could affirm, on the basis of Gollwitzer & Brandstätter (1997) results (study 1), that implementation intentions are somewhat necessary as a useful self-regulatory tool. Keeping in mind that half of the difficult-to-implement goals were implicit related to a "professional identity" as a higher order goal it could be predicted that stressing explicitly this link through **identity implementation intention** will help not only better "get started" but also "get more motivated". This is an important issue because after successful action initiation: "there is a long and cumbersome way to go, one that requires many steps and sustained intentional effort" (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997, p. 188).

8. Varieties of motivated implementation intentions

Motivated intentions are not assumed to be all equal: they could be at least classified "vertical" by their position in the goals representation hierarchy and "horizontally" by different content proprieties.

Therefore additional "morphological refinements" could be done concerning varieties of motivated intentions. We think the "because argument" in itself could be of different types (see Figure 2 for some preliminary intuitions on this).

Figure 2: Varieties of motivated implementation intentions

Intention type	Example
Identity implementation intention	“I intend to sit down in my room and write a report next Saturday, right after the dinner. I will do this because I am a good student”.
Circularly (motivated) implementation intentions	“I intend to sit down in my room and write a report next Saturday, right after the dinner. I will do this because I strongly intend to follow the specified plan”.
Extrinsically motivated intentions	“I intend to sit down in my room and write a report next Saturday, right after the dinner. I will do this because this I must do this assigned homework”.

The first and most interesting form of motivated intention are **identity implementation intentions**. In a hierarchical goal structure identity goals are higher order goals. The concept of identity implementation intentions is important that it offers theoretical and empirical bridge for the integration of the self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) and implementation intentions frameworks.

A second type of motivated implementation intention is a kind of **circularly (motivated) implementation intention**. We choose this label because no super-ordinate goal is invoked so a person just “push twice” for sure. What is most important with this kind of phrasing implementation intention is that fact that it was already tested for effectiveness by Steller (1992; reference from Gollwitzer, 1999, p. 499) even it was’t conceived as circularly motivated implementation intention.

The third type is one that could have relatively unpredictable effect on action initiation and persistence because of being framed as **extrinsically motivated intention** and therefore we think the implicit reactance could not be avoided in this case.

9. Final remarks

A host of additional hypothesis could be formulate in advance just in the case motivated intentions would be found as a viable and useful form of goal setting – both theoretically and empirically.

For example the identity implementation intentions could have different content: the “because identity” could imply, for example a desired self or a feared self (Markus & Nurius, 1986); it could also be a ought self or ideal self (Higgins, 1987; see also the regulatory focus approach developed recently;

Higgins, 1997). Indirect suggestion in support for the effectiveness of feared identity formulation of the identity implementation intention could be found in the earlier work of Leventhal and his colleagues (Leventhal, Watts & Pagano, 1967; Lewenthal, Singer & Jones, 1965) and more recently in Freitas, Liberman, Salovey, & Higgins, (2002).

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