Commentary: Engage or disengage? Interpretations from a resource conservation perspective

Guido H. E. Gendolla

Accepted: 7 October 2022 / Published online: 31 October 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract
In this commentary, I discuss the eight empirical contributions to the Motivation and Emotion special issue on goal disen- gagement from a resource conservation perspective. This process was not in the focus of the reported studies, but is central for understanding both engaging and disengaging. I will outline that many of the new findings on disengagement reported in this special issue are highly compatible with the predictions of and research on motivational intensity theory. Examples are the roles of commitment, subjective goal value, affective experiences, autonomy, self-awareness, and action planning. These variables have been found to be central for both engagement and disengagement and their consideration in a resource mobilization perspective should contribute to a more complete understanding of “letting go”.

Keywords Disengagement · Resource mobilization · Effort

Comprehending goal disengagement is important for a complete understanding of human action. Giving up early in face of obstacles impedes the attainment of difficult goals. But staying engaged too long can also be problematic—for example, if success becomes very unlikely or very costly (Brockner, 1992). Thus, disengagement has both advantages and disadvantages, and this special issue in Motivation and Emotion provides interesting new insights into the process of “letting go”. However, in contrast to the introductive over- view (Kappes & Schattke, 2022), the eight empirical contribu- tions have—surprisingly—hardly considered an important process that is at the core of disengagement: The process of resource mobilization in goal pursuit.

All actions need resources—which can be biochemical, psychological, or physical in nature (Silvestrini & Gendolla, 2019). Consequently, the psychological process that deter- mines how these resources are mobilized is also central for understanding disengagement—i.e., stopping goal pursuit. Brehm’s motivational intensity theory (MIT) has provided

a remarkably clear and precise explanation of this process (Brehm & Self, 1989; Brehm et al., 1983). According to MIT, the intensity of resource mobilization (i.e., effort) is grounded in a resource conservation principle. People avoid “overpaying”. That is, they do not avoid high effort if it is necessary and justified, but they avoid exerting more effort than necessary for attaining their goals, which has clear con- sequences for disengagement. As depicted in Fig. 1, MIT predicts effort to rise proportionally to the subjective difficu- lty of an action as long as success is possible and the nec- essary effort is justified. Consequently, if success appears to be impossible or too costly, people should disengage imme- diately to avoid the waste of resources. Only if subjective demand is unspecified (i.e., unclear or unfixed), the impor - tance of success directly determines the intensity of effort.

Moreover, in MIT, subjective goal value (i.e., goal attractiv- eness) is a direct function of effort intensity. That is, MIT makes a distinction between goal importance, which defines the maximally justified effort (i.e., potential motivation) and subjective goal value which is directly determined by the intensity of actual effort—a point that is not always clear in the introduction by Kappes and Schattke (2022).¹

¹ To give an example—a person who is very hungry is willing to pay a lot for a meal—getting food is an important goal. But if the meal is cheap, the person should only pay the low price (low effort) that is necessary—and therefore, the subjective attractiveness of that meal will be low, too. However, if the meal’s price is high, if the high price is justified due to the intense hunger, and if the person has the neces-
Four decades of research in the context of MIT have identified many variables that can influence the level of the subjective experience of task demand and the magnitude of maximally justified effort and thereby explain who should disengage on higher or lower difficulty levels (see Gendolla et al., 2012b, 2019; Richter et al., 2016; Wright & Kirby, 2001, for overviews). Interestingly, those variables correspond to many of those highlighted in the contributions to this special issue, as I will discuss now.

\section*{Disengaging temporally}

In this special issue, Mayer and Freund (2022) highlighted the affective consequences of two types of goal prioritization: disengaging completely vs. temporal goal shelving. Shelving looks like a form of self-determined “goal freezing”. Both strategies led to reduced subjective goal value, but in contrast to complete disengagement, shelving did not reduce commitment. Moreover, reengaging in a previously shelved goal led to increased goal value of the now prioritized goal. Seen from an effort perspective, this is not surprising and highly compatible with the principles and affective consequences of resource mobilization in terms of MIT (Brehm & Self, 1989; Brehm et al., 1983). Accordingly, subjective goal value is a direct function of the effort people exert for goal attainment—and many studies have found support for this idea (Wright & Brehm, 1989). By contrast, commitment (only) defines the importance of a goal and thus justifies effort (Bouzidi et al., 2022). Consequently, commitment should not be affected in the same way as subjective goal value. This is compatible with the shelving strategy highlighted by Mayer and Freund (2022): People can stay committed but experience low subjective goal value because they do (momentarily) not exert effort for a shelved goal. However, once they reengage and mobilize resources for goal attainment, subjective goal value should increase again.

\section*{Action crises}

Another important variable was identified by Kreibich et al. (2022), who investigated the moderating role of self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) in action crises—the experience of a conflict between staying engaged in an action or disengaging (Brandstätter et al., 2013). Self-awareness was adaptive—it fostered a problem-solving focus, reduced the experience of action crises, and led to increased academic performance in their second study. This perfectly fits the effort-related finding that self-awareness justifies high effort and thus prevents disengagement in face of high obstacles (e.g., Gendolla et al., 2008; Silvia et al., 2010). Moreover, the findings by Kreibich et al. (2022) are compatible with research by Carver et al. (1979). There, success expectancy effects on persistence depended on self-awareness: Self-aware participants with optimistic prospects persisted in the face of obstacles, while those with low expectancies of success disengaged. Also in the research by Kreibich et al. (2022) participants adapted their behavior to their expectations only when they were self-aware.

Also Light and Chodos (2022) highlighted action crises and focused on the affective consequences of receiving social support in that situation. They found that social support during an action crisis predicted negative emotions and depressive symptoms—which have been shown to systematically influence effort and disengagement by increasing the level of subjective demand (see ). Adding to the literature of the negative effects of receiving help, action crises seem
to be conditions in which receiving help is not perceived as supportive. However, not receiving help did not have more positive effects and support did also not have negative consequences when participants did not experience an action crisis. Accordingly, action crises are psychologically vulnerable states in which external support does not help.

**The role of autonomy**

Two other contributions highlighted the role of the quality of motivation in disengagement. Holding et al. (2022) point out that motivation quality for disengagement is an important moderator of stopping goal pursuit. As autonomous motivation for engaging in an action, and especially giving people the opportunity to choose what they want to do, fosters performance and well-being (see Patal et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2021), autonomy in the decision to disengage supports efficient disengagement. However, one tricky issue is that autonomy in engaging in an action, by giving people the opportunity to choose what they want to do, promotes persistence—people stay engaged for long in self-chosen actions (e.g., Gendolla et al., 2021, Study 1). This suggests that autonomy effects on action are context-dependent. Autonomy in the decision to engage in an action can result in resistance against disengagement, while autonomy in the decision to disengage can prevent the negative effects of “letting go” (Klinger, 1975; Wrosch et al., 2003). From this perspective, Holding et al. (2022) help to advance a more complete understanding of how autonomy influences human behavior.

Timar-Anton et al. (2022) explored the connection between motivation quality, action crisis, identity, and disengagement in the transition to student life. Action crisis predicted increased commitment for autonomous study goals, while controlled motivation increased after disengagement. As the research by Holding et al. (2022), these findings point to the important role of the reasons why people engage in an action. Resolving the internal conflict of an action crisis guides people into the direction of their personal goals, and making such decisions justifies high effort (Bouzidi et al., 2022). That is, besides their negative affective components, action crises can also be options for clearing one’s mind and prioritizing personal goals. Controlled motivation did not benefit from an action crisis that way.

---

5 I am aware that the freedom to choose between action alternatives is only one aspect of autonomous motivation in Self-Determination Theory (e.g., Ryan et al., 2021). However, I see having personal control over what one is doing as the minimal necessary condition for—and thus the core aspect of—autonomy. The extent of autonomy can, of course, vary in dependence on choice conditions. Action choices can be completely free, restricted, or even forced.

---

### External frustration

The research by Hubley and Scholer (2022) investigated the effect of frozen goals—i.e., goals whose pursuit has been disrupted due to external constraints. The authors found that frozen goals are dissatisfying. Similarly as action crises, they were associated with negative affective experiences (stress, depression, anxiety) and reduced subjective well-being, which are indicators of frustration. However, given that frozen goals are not unattainable forever, I wonder if they could also elicit anger, maybe in dependence on other moderator variables. It is well conceivable that individual differences in BAS (behavior-activation-system: proneness to anger) and BIS (behavior-inhibition system: proneness to distress) strength have different effects (see Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Anger has its motivational benefits, like the experience of high coping potential (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) and thus reduced subjective difficulty in dealing with obstacles. Consequently, anger let people staying engaged in difficult tasks (Chatelain et al., 2016; Freydefont et al., 2012). That is, individuals with a strong BAS may be protected against the negative effects of action crises, controlled disengagement, and frozen goals. Moreover, Hubley and Scholer (2022) also report that people reported lower effort for frozen goals. Also this is compatible with MIT (Brehm & Self, 1989)—exerting effort for goals that are (momentarily) not attainable would be a waste of resources and thus violate the principle of resource conservation.

The experiment of Rühs et al. (2022) investigated another effect of external frustration on goal disengagement in a cyberball paradigm that was developed to investigate the effects of social exclusion. In their procedure, participants’ need to belong was frustrated by social exclusion, which led to reduced valuation of the goal to belong—an indicator of disengagement. This finding fits the effort-goal valence link posited by MIT (Brehm & Self, 1989; Wright & Brehm, 1989): Subjective goal value should be low when it appears impossible to attain a goal.

### Planning and reengaging

The contribution by Bieleke et al. (2022) studied individual differences in the use of implementation intentions and boredom in disengaging and reengaging. Tendencies to escape boredom were positively related to reengaging in frozen goals in their first study. This is not surprising, because engaging in actions is an efficient way to escape boredom—a very aversive state (Wilson et al., 2014). More relevant, forming implementation intentions in terms of “if-then planning” (see Gollwitzer, 2018) reduced the tendency to disengage and increased the tendency to reengage. Also these
effects of implementation intentions make sense in an effort perspective. “If-then planning” has a facilitating effect—it makes action execution easier. Consequently, people with “if-then plans” can stay engaged in difficult endeavors in which mere goal intentions lead to disengagement (Freydefont et al., 2016, Study 2). Accordingly, “if-then planning” should also facilitate reengaging in frozen goals—especially if goal commitment has not been reduced.

Conclusions and outlook

The contributions to this special issue on goal disengagement help to advance a deeper understanding of the process of “letting go”. Affective processes and the motivation quality of engaging in an action—and disengaging from it—seem to be central. Although none of the empirical studies presented in this special issue considered resource mobilization (and conservation) as the central process, it is easily possible to interpret the reported findings in terms of the MIT principles for both engagement and disengagement (Brehm & Self, 1989). As stated above, all actions need resources for being executed and disengagement means the stopping of resource mobilization. Discussing the findings of this special issue from this perspective may open the door for follow-up research that integrates what we have learned about resource mobilization and disengagement from an energetic perspective on motivation with the new findings reported in this special issue. Although research on MIT has been to date nearly exclusively conducted under laboratory conditions, assessing resource mobilization is not restricted to that context. Today, objective ambulatory measurement of physiological activity is possible in ecological settings, and self-report measures of subjective goal value, which should be directly linked to effort intensity, have always been possible in the field. That is, future research could draw a more complete image of disengagement in both the lab and the field by considering and assessing energetic processes underlying goal pursuit.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Geneva. This is a commentary and there was no funding for writing it.

Data availability This is a commentary and no data were collected.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.
Gendolla, G. H. E., & Wright, R. A. (2009). Effort. In D. Sander & K. R. Scherer (Eds.), The Oxford companion to emotion and the affective sciences (pp. 134–135). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gendolla, G. H. E., Bouzidi, Y. S., Arvaniti, S., Gollwitzer, P. M., & Oettingen, G. (2021). Task choice immunizes against incidental affective influences in volition. Motivation Science, 7, 229–241. https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000225

Gendolla, G. H. E., Brinkmann, K., & Silvestrini, N. (2012a). Gloomy and lazy? On the impact of mood and depressive symptoms on effort-related cardiovascular response. In R. A. Wright & G. H. E. Gendolla (Eds.), How motivation affects cardiovascular response: Mechanisms and applications (pp. 139–155). APA Press.

Gendolla, G. H. E., Wright, R. A., & Richter, M. (2019). Advancing research using Cyberball.Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000194

Gendolla, G. H. E., Wright, R. A., & Richter, M. (2012b). Effort intensity: Some insights from the cardiovascular system. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), The Oxford handbook of human motivation (1st ed., pp. 420–438). Oxford University Press.

Gendolla, G. H. E., Wright, R. A., & Richter, M. (2019). Advancing issues in motivation intensity research: Updated insights from the cardiovascular system. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), The Oxford handbook of human motivation (2nd ed., pp. 372–392). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190666453.013.21

Gollwitzer, P. M. (2018). The goal concept: A helpful tool for theory development and testing in motivation science. Motivation Science, 4(3), 185–205. https://doi.org/10.1037 mot0000115

Hubley, C., & Scholer, A. A. (2022). Melting COVID-frozen goals: How goal disengagement supports well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Motivation and Emotion, 143, 116–125. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09975-w

Kappes, C., & Schattke, K. (2022). You have to let go sometimes: Advances in understanding goal disengagement. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09952-3

Kling, E. (1971). Effort and goal disengagement from incentives. Psychological Review, 82, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076171

Kreibich, A., Wolf, B. M., Ghassemi, M., Herrmann, M., & Brandstätter, V. (2022). How self-awareness is connected to less experience of action crises in personal goal pursuit. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1016/j .ixpsycho .2019. 07. 003

Kappes, C., & Schattke, K. (2022). You have to let go sometimes: Advances in understanding goal disengagement. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09980-z

Kreibich, A., Wolf, B. M., Ghassemi, M., Herrmann, M., & Brandstätter, V. (2022). How self-awareness is connected to less experience of action crises in personal goal pursuit. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09942-5

Lerner, J. S., & Keltner, D. (2001). Fear, anger, and risk. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81, 146–159. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.1.146

Light, A. E., & Chodos, E. (2022). Don’t give up? It’s a little complicated: action crisis moderates consequences of goal support. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09977-8

Mayer, Z., & Freund, A. (2022). Better off without? Benefits and costs of resolving goal conflict through goal shelving and goal disengagement. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09966-x

Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effect of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. Psychological Bulletin, 134, 270–300. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.270

Richter, M., Gendolla, G. H. E., & Wright, R. A. (2016). Three decades of research on motivational intensity theory: What we have learned about effort and what we still don’t know. Advances in Motivation Science, 3, 149–186. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2016.02.001

Rübs, F., Greve, W., & Kappes, C. (2022). Inducing and blocking the goal to belong in an experimental setting: Goal disengagement research using Cyberball. Motivation and Emotion. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09975-w

Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Vansteenkiste, M., & Soenens, B. (2021). Building a science of motivated persons: Self-determination theory’s empirical approach to human experience and the regulation of behavior. Motivation Science, 7, 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000194

Silvestrini, N., & Gendolla, G. H. E. (2019). Affect and cognitive control: Insights from research on effort mobilization. International Journal of Psychophysiology, 143, 116–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2019.07.003

Silvia, P. J., McCord, D. M., & Gendolla, G. H. E. (2010). Self-focused attention, performance expectancies, and the intensity of effort: Do people try harder for harder goals? Motivation and Emotion, 34, 363–370. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-010-9192-7

Timmer-Anton, C., Negru-Subirica, O., & Opre, A. (2022). The role of action crises in first-year students’ identity processes at the critical moment of goal disengagement, using intensive longitudinal data. Motivation and Emotion (in press).

Wilson, T. D., Reinar, D. A., Westgate, E. C., Gilbert, D. T., Ellerbeck, N., Hahn, C., Brown, C. L., & Shaked, A. (2014). Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind. Science, 345, 75–77. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1250830

Wright, R. A., & Brehm, J. W. (1989). Energization and goal attractiveness. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), Goal concepts in personality and social psychology (pp. 169–210). Erlbaum.

Wright, R. A., & Kirby, L. D. (2001). Effort determination of cardiovascular response: An integrative analysis with applications in social psychology. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 33, 255–307. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(01)80007-1

Wrosch, C., Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Schulz, R. (2003). The importance of goal disengagement in adaptive self-regulation: When giving up is beneficial. Self and Identity, 2, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309021

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.