RESEARCH STATEMENT

Understanding how people meet goals is among psychology's basic challenges. Research at the broadening interface of motivation and cognition (e.g., Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996) seeks to identify the goal representations that guide action. It then becomes important to delineate how such representations develop and operate. With these aims, I pursue two research programs that distinguish between representing goal-related phenomena (a) in abstract versus concrete terms and (b) as affording the attainment of aspirations versus responsibilities. This work helps suggest new answers to enduring questions, such as how people initiate goal-directed action, evaluate their goal progress, and come to enjoy particular actions.

ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE ACTION REPRESENTATION

People can represent action (e.g., "paying the rent") at various levels of abstraction, from a concrete, low level ("writing a check") to an abstract, high level ("maintaining a place to live"). Previous research showed that people prefer high-level representations but will adopt low-level ones in response to task difficulty (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). However, surprisingly little work has explored these different representations' motivational implications. I proposed that they would impact particularly people's motivated search for self-relevant information. I also suggested a mechanism whereby abstract action representations develop.

Abstract and Concrete Self-Evaluative Goals

Because people often possess overly positive self-views, a reasonable assumption is that they rarely desire to assess themselves accurately (e.g., Brown, 1990). I explored the alternative possibility that people typically hold the abstract aim of accurate self-assessment but often adopt self-enhancement goals in order to traverse more easily the feedback-acquisition process. This proposal implies that people adopting abstract (rather than concrete) action representations should be more open to receiving potentially negative feedback.

Self-evaluation. Data from six studies supported this prediction, whether we measured or manipulated participants' action representations (Freitas, Salovey, & Liberman, 2001). Moreover, effects obtained on social-comparison preferences as well as on preferences for different types of objective feedback, independent of participants' moods, success expectancies, or subjective importance of the attribute being assessed.

Inferring others' self-evaluative goals. The above reasoning implies that people in a concrete vs. abstract mode also should expect others to pursue different goals. To test this idea, I developed a mindset induction directing participants to consider either why (abstract mindset) or how (concrete mindset) they might perform different activities. On subsequent, purportedly unrelated tasks, participants adopting the abstract mindset expected and advocated that others pursue accurate-assessment goals to a greater extent than did participants adopting the concrete mindset. As predicted, this effect was
mediated by two variables: (a) participants’ accessibility (assessed via reaction time) of the different goals others’ situations afforded and (b) participants’ rated likelihood that others' situations would help realize the different goals. These four studies' findings show that identifying others’ goals depends partly on how one represents others' situations, which, in turn, partly reflects one's own mindset (Freitas, Trope, & Gollwitzer, 2001). Merely considering why versus how to take a vacation, for example, might convince a high school teacher that students desire brutally honest rather than overly positive feedback.

Future directions. Investigating the feedback process as it unfolds can test whether people’s self-evaluative strategies grow increasingly biased as the moment for feedback acquisition grows nearer (and as action construals grow increasingly concrete). Such work can examine, for example, what happens to traces of realistic-assessment goals as self-enhancement goals exert increasing sway. These findings also suggest how people might confront self-esteem-threatening situations. With Geraldine Downey, I previously found that people's expectations of social rejection influence strongly their willingness to enter into and their responses to social interactions (Freitas & Downey, 1998; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998). Can adopting an abstract construal of a social interaction, then, increase rejection-sensitive individuals' likelihood of entering the interaction?

Action-Goal Linking: A Mechanism Fostering Abstract Action Representation

What mechanisms foster abstract action representations? Efficiently retrieving memories depends partly on inhibiting the accessibility of mental constructs with potential to impede accurate retrieval (Anderson & Bjork, 1999). I reasoned that analogous processes might affect how people represent action. I proposed that mentally linking an action to a goal inhibits the accessibility of the action's goal-irrelevant features, whose presence would impede the process of linking action and goal. The result of this proposed inhibition is an abstract representation of the action's purpose that lacks the action's specific features.

Inhibition in action representation. My research confirmed that after linking some, but not other, actions to goals, participants were slower to recognize words representing specific features of the goal-linked action than of the goal-unlinked action (Freitas, 2001). Suggesting active inhibition of the accessibility of the action's specific features, this finding provides a window into the cognitive processes facilitating abstract action representation.

Action substitutability. This inhibition should facilitate an action representation lacking many unique features. Because only those things in life that are unique are irreplaceable, construing an action only in terms of a subset of its non-unique features should increase one's likelihood of considering the action substitutable by others. This idea garnered support from four studies examining goals and activities of various contents (e.g., health improvement, academic performance). Moreover, mediational analyses suggested that fostering an action representation lacking many unique
features is how linking an action to a goal increases the action's perceived substitutability (Freitas, 2001). Thus, attempting to convince oneself or others to engage in an action by emphasizing the action's link to an important goal could backfire, by increasing the action's perceived substitutability and thereby lessening the likelihood of action engagement.

**Future directions.** When an action is deemed substitutable, any success or failure at it is not a final verdict. Accordingly, will linking an action to a goal decrease one's attention to instances of action failure and success? This prediction received preliminary support from an experiment that assessed (reaction-time based) accessibility and explicit memory of action success (Freitas, 2001). I look forward to pursuing further this issue.

**REPRESENTING GOALS AS RESPONSIBILITIES AND ASPIRATIONS**

Just as people can construe the same action at a high or low level of abstraction, people can construe the same action as realizing a responsibility or an aspiration. People view responsibilities as minimal standards they ought to attain and aspirations as maximal standards they ideally hope to attain (Higgins, 1998). I reasoned that these differences in regulatory focus should help illuminate the issues of when people initiate action and whether they enjoy it.

**Regulatory Focus and Action Enjoyment**

Previous research shows that action is especially enjoyable when people perform it for its own sake rather than to receive an externally provided reward as well as when people perform it in order to reach their own goals. I tested whether an additional enjoyment source is regulatory fit, the action's fit to one's regulatory state. If responsibilities are viewed as minimal standards, then vigilance (to avoid obstacles to meeting the standard) should be the preferred means of self-regulation represented as meeting responsibility. If aspirations, on the other hand, are viewed as maximal standards, then eagerness (to take advantage of opportunities to meet the standard) should be the preferred means of self-regulation represented as attaining aspiration.

**Eagerness- and vigilance-framed tasks.** To test these ideas, in three studies, I primed participants' regulatory states by having them write essays describing either their aspirations or their responsibilities (Freitas & Higgins, in press). On purportedly unrelated tasks, participants rated eagerness-framed strategies (e.g., "attend all classes") more enjoyable following the aspiration priming but vigilance-framed strategies (e.g., "avoid missing any classes") more enjoyable following the responsibility priming. High regulatory fit also increased participants' enjoyment of, perceived success at, and willingness to repeat a novel laboratory task (entailing either eagerly circling "helpful" objects or vigilantly crossing out "harmful" objects).

**Avoiding distractions.** Goal-unrelated distractions, such as the interesting diversions of the Internet, are obstacles to goal attainment. Based on the above reasoning, vigilance to avoid such distractions should fit responsibility-oriented self-regulation
better than aspiration-oriented self-regulation. Data from two studies supported this hypothesis (Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, in press). When solving math problems, for example, participants who first received a responsibility (rather than aspiration) prime reported greater task enjoyment and correctly solved more problems when they also attempted to resist the temptation of watching attractive video clips. Apart from the strategies people deliberately use to avoid tempting distractions, then, some regulatory states may equip people to avoid distractions better than others do.

**Future directions.** Regulatory fit might affect one's enjoyment not only of one's own actions but also of other phenomena. If another person's actions strategically fit one's own regulatory state, for instance, will one imbue the person with additional value, perhaps reflected in increased liking or attraction? I am currently pursuing this issue.

**Regulatory Focus and Action Initiation**

These considerations suggest potentially important implications for action initiation. By facilitating viewing goals as minimal standards one ought to attain, representing self-regulation as meeting responsibility should lead one to initiate promptly goal-directed action. By facilitating viewing goals as maximal standards one only hopes to attain, representing self-regulation as attaining aspiration should lead one to feel little pressure to initiate immediately any single action. Findings from five studies supported these predictions, regardless of whether regulatory focus was chronically accessible or situationally induced; whether participants faced hypothetical tasks, laboratory tasks, or real-world tasks; or whether participants considered actions singly or as parts of multiple-action sequences (Freitas, Liberman, Salovey, & Higgins, in press; Freitas & Salovey, 2001).

**Future directions.** These findings invite further investigation of goal-directed behavior and affect. When working serially through an array of pleasant and unpleasant tasks, for example, will aspiration-oriented people, who view completing the entire array of tasks as less urgent, be more likely to perform the pleasant tasks first? Moreover, when facing multiple, conflicting actions that simultaneously require attention, will responsibility-oriented people, who view action completion as highly urgent, experience greater negative affect?

**CONCLUSION**

In summary, complimentary strands of my research suggest that representing the same actions in abstract versus concrete terms and as means of attaining responsibilities versus aspirations influences a host of basic self-regulatory phenomena that play important roles in people's everyday lives. I look forward to examining further both the specific underlying mechanisms and the general applications of these cognitive-motivational processes.