CHAPTER

3

EXPLICATING THE GOAL CONSTRUCT: TOOLS FOR THEORISTS

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Why do people produce messages? Although one can conceive of many possible answers to this question, Berlo (1960) made an especially succinct and compelling reply: "to communicate is to influence with intent" (p. 128). From his perspective, people create messages in order to achieve some end. Communication is strategic, motivated, and purposive. Very much in line with this thinking is the notion that message production is the result of a goal-driven process.

In the past decade, we have witnessed a landslide of work attesting to the importance of the goal construct in theories of communication. Some scholars have oriented their effort toward illuminating the nature (Craig, 1986) or the substance of goals (Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994). Others have studied the operation of goals in contexts such as bargaining and negotiation (Donohue & Diez, 1985; Wilson & Putnam, 1990), conversational retreat (Kellermann, Reynolds, & Chen, 1991), and interpersonal influence (Dillard, 1990; Wilson, 1990). Questions concerning how goals interact with one another to shape message output has also generated considerable interest (Bingham & Burleson, 1989; Greene & Lindsey, 1989; Tracy, 1984; see also Wilson, chap. 2, this volume).

While this accelerating level of research activity signals consensus on the *utility* of the goal construct, it is increasingly apparent that consensus does not extend to a *definition* of the goal construct. With the appearance of each new article, it is possible to see some tacit twist on the basic idea, some additional assumption, some implicit adaptation to the particulars of a

specific area of inquiry. Each of these theoretical mutations has the potential to strengthen our theories and our research. But, as new subspecies of the goal construct proliferate we need to be aware of the similarities and differences among them if we are to make informed choices.

My aim in this chapter is to articulate some of the theoretical issues that must be confronted by anyone working with the goal construct. A genuinely thorough analysis of these issues would require a book-length manuscript. Consequently, I have limited my focus to those concerns that I see as fundamental in the sense that they should be addressed before more sophisticated theorizing can proceed.

I hope that the distinctions I have drawn out might be useful tools for those interested in theorizing about goal-directed communication behavior. Accordingly, the approach I've taken is more analytic than argumentative. Rather than advocate the superiority of any particular position, I have presented a reasonably balanced account of some of the conceptual choice-points associated with the goal construct. Given the biases that accrue from my own choices, this manuscript probably fails to achieve a balance that is satisfactory to all. Nonetheless, some understanding of the choice-points in goal theorizing is important. Those decisions will determine how one's research should proceed while simultaneously delimiting what *can be* found. Making an informed selection from the array of alternatives requires that we be explicit about the consequences of that choice. For the most part, the consequences boil down to one overarching question: Is the definition useful? Although there are many features that a construct should possess before it can be judged useful (e.g., Miller & Nicholson, 1976; Smith, 1988), only a subset of them are needed for the current analysis. A brief exposition of those criteria is given next.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

One desirable feature of a constitutive definition is *clarity of delineation*. A useful definition is one that plainly denotes the essential features of the construct. Equally important, it must make clear those features considered *non*essential. Which aspects of a construct are necessary, which are sufficient, should also be specified.

A useful construct should exhibit the proper scope or *range of meaning*. A construct that is defined too broadly will inevitably contain phenomena of different sorts; the contents of the definition will be nonhomogeneous. On the other hand, a construct defined too narrowly runs the risks of triviality. It is desirable to encompass as much conceptual terrain as possible while avoiding the problem of nonhomogeneous elements.

A third requirement for a good conceptual definition is the *specification of subcomponents*. Additionally, the relationships among the subcomponents should be spelled out. For example, in the persuasion literature credibility is usually thought to be composed of expertise and trustworthiness. If either is lacking, the speaker cannot be considered credible. Both are necessary, together they are sufficient.

Finally, for those who take empirical observation as an essential element of our craft, the constructs that we work with must *guide operational definition*. Regardless of whether that operational procedure is one of measurement or one of manipulation, it should show close correspondence to the theoretical construct and it should provide good match between the concept and a numerical scale.

QUESTIONS ABOUT GOALS

Sometimes conceptual definitions are developed in a contemplative and proactive manner. At other times, and for a variety of reasons, construct development proceeds without thorough articulation of the assumptions that undergird the construct. When the second case obtains, two outcomes are virtually certain: (a) that the assumptions will become explicit eventually, and (b) that the research would have benefited had that articulation occurred sooner rather than later. In this section, I present a series of questions that anyone working with the goal construct should consider. The various answers that one might make are considered in light of the criteria for evaluating a conceptual definition.

Must Goals Be Conscious?

To the best of my knowledge, no one has advanced the claim that goals are invariably and necessarily unconscious. However, there is great diversity of opinion regarding whether or not goals can exist outside of conscious awareness. Certainly, many writers have taken the position that motivations of some sort *may* exist outside of conscious awareness (Craig, 1986; Freud, 1949). Some contend that goals remain beyond awareness more often than not (e.g., Read & Miller, 1989). A more restrictive position would claim that goals cannot exist outside of conscious awareness. For purposes of contrast with alternative positions, this can be called the *inside-only* perspective to underscore the claim that goals reside *only* within conscious awareness.

When Oatley (1988) argues that "Goals may be unconscious" (p. 15) he implies another position, one that suggests that goals are *typically* conscious (see also Emmons, 1989, p. 101). Though he admits to the possibilty that goals exist on the other side of awareness, the conditions under which this might

occur are not specified. Berger (1995) uses the term *implicit* to describe goals of which we are unaware, while Craig (1986) calls them *functional.*

Some reflection on the origin of goals suggests that a meaningful distinction can be drawn within the category of implicit goals. Two possibilities suggest themselves. For one, Peterson (1989) contends that knowledge of one's own goals "may require a level of insight and integrity that is not easy to attain" (p. 340). He apparently assumes that goals exist outside of awareness and that it is only through some effortful process that they may be made apparent to the person who possesses them. This position might be termed the *outside-in* perspective because it asserts that goals have their origin outside of consciousness and only later are they brought into awareness.

A position that reverses that order is the *inside-out* perspective. In this view, goals originate in consciousness, but eventually drift out of awareness as the behavior becomes automatic. A person attempting to master new word processing software may devote considerable effort to learning the keystrokes necessary to cut and paste, scroll screen by screen, or print with a particular font. Soon, however, these actions become well learned. The goal or goals that initially accounted for the behavior(s) vanish even though the behaviors recur. In this way, actions may remain goal directed (i.e., strategic) even though the goal is no longer the proximal cause of the behavior.

Evaluation. Researchers' preferences concerning the degree of consciousness that should be attached to the goal construct appear to be based on the relative concern for scope and precision. Those who privilege scope over precision tend toward one of the positions that places goals out of consciousness (e.g., Donohue, 1990; O'Keefe, 1990). It is argued that one of the advantages to this approach is the possibility of a more detailed analysis, one that attends to the multifunctional nature of human communication. This position depends heavily on the wholly plausible assumption that people often behave far more strategically than they realize (Kellermann, 1992). From this premise, it is sometimes argued that a careful and insightful analyst should be able to reveal motivations for the talk that are inaccessible to or unnoticed by the message producer.

When concern for precision outweighs the desire for scope, researchers opt for an *inside-only* conceptualization of goals. This choice encourages precision on two fronts. Clarity of delineation is enhanced by narrowing the goal construct and, in the process, making the contents of the conceptual area more homogeneous. Operational precision is also strengthened because goals are, in this view, mental representations that are directly accessible by the subject and indirectly accessible to the researcher by self-report.

The reality of social interaction is not likely to be as neat as I have drawn it here, cleanly separating the conscious from the unconscious, awareness

from obliviousness. To claim that human communication is the result of both conscious and unconscious forces is hardly controversial. However, Berger (1995) makes clear the problem that this position poses for analysis of goals: "Given that conscious attention is a relatively scarce resource, it is almost a certainty that, in any social-interaction situation, several goals will be implicit [i.e., unconscious] for the actors involved, and that goals at the focal point of conscious awareness will change during the course of most social-interaction episodes . . ." (p. 144). This observation suggests the naivete of posing the question of goal consciousness in a dichotomous fashion. Instead of the either-or formulation, students of the goal construct need to address when goals exist in consciousness, how they arrive there, how long they stay, and by what mechanisms this movement occurs.

Is Commitment a Necessary Feature of Goals?

It is common to see definitions of the goal construct that include commitment as a constitutive element. Klinger (1985) offers an illustration when he says that "*Goal* as used here refers to any desired state of affairs that the individual *is committed to bringing about or maintaining*" (emphasis added; p. 312). But what is meant by commitment? And, to what extent is it a *necessary* component of the goal construct? The answers to these questions are best considered after a brief examination of theoretical perspectives on the causes and effects of commitment. An early treatment of commitment can be found in Kiesler's (1971) work within the cognitive dissonance tradition. He defines commitment as ". . . the pledging or binding of the individual to behavioral acts" (Kiesler & Sakamura, 1966, p. 349). This is often accomplished by publically announcing one's intentions or position on an issue. The effect of commitment is to render actions and cognitions less changeable.

Other theorists deemphasize the social aspects of commitment, privileging instead explanations more psychological in nature. Locke's (1968) goal-setting theory, designed to explain individual performance in organizations, treats commitment in terms of will or determination. Goal-setting theory is quite explicit in its claim that goal difficulty has a positive influence on job performance, but only if the individual is committed to the goal (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Commitment itself is explained by an expectancy-valence model. That is, goal commitment is a multiplicative function of the attractiveness of the goal and the subjective probability of goal attainment (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Thus, from the perspective of goal-setting theory, commitment is a moderator variable. Commitment is a necessary side condition for the difficulty–performance relationship, but its conceptual status is independent of the goal construct.

A more elaborate analysis of the means by which commitment arises can be found in Heckhausen and Kuhl's (1985) model of the precursors to action.

To begin, they distinguish between three concepts: wishes, wants, and intentions. *Wishes* are essentially fantasies, that is, they are desires that have not made contact with empirical reality. If wishes exceed a subjective probability-of-attainment threshold, then they may be transformed into wants. Therefore, *wants* are desirable end-states that are possible, perhaps even likely, at some point in the future. The metamorphosis of want to *intention* requires a check for opportunity, time, importance, urgency, and means (abbreviated as OTIUM). If the individual judges that fulfillment of the want is possible on the OTIUM criteria, then it becomes an intention (i.e., a goal).

In this embellished expectancy-valence model, the likelihood of commitment increases as a function of each of the OTIUM variables. Unlike the typical expectancy-valence model, the precise nature of the relationships among the OTIUM criteria (additive, substitutable, etc.) is not specified. In this perspective, we see commitment used as an essential feature of the construct. A goal is not a goal until the threshold of commitment is crossed.

Evaluation. It is readily apparent that commitment and consciousness share some common conceptual space. When individuals are determined to attain a certain goal, they are surely aware of that determination. This fact is further evidenced in the actions that individuals often take to manage their own levels of commitment. "One of the simplest ways to commit yourself to a course of action is to go around telling all your friends that you are definitely going to do something" (Salancik, 1977, p. 6). All of this suggests that commitment is, at least in one respect, conceptually subordinate to goal awareness. The question of commitment does not become meaningful until after an individual becomes aware of a desire. In this application, commitment is used as a means of clarifying the goal construct. It would appear that increased conceptual precision is gained at the expense of scope. However, the expectancy-value models carry us a considerable distance toward regaining any loss of scope by elaborating the process by which desirable outcomes are tested against the standards of possibility and probability of attainment. Rather than slice the goal construct into smaller and smaller static conceptual units, they provide an account of how motivational forces are shaped, focused, and instantiated. Arguably, the sense of process conveyed by these accounts, especially that of Heckhausen and Kuhl's (1985) model takes us beyond construct explication into substantive theory. Decisions about the role of commitment are valuable, perhaps even essential, to action-oriented theories.

One problem remains. We may prefer a more motion-oriented theoretical perspective that places goals outside of conscious awareness. Alternately, some theories are pointedly noncommittal on the issue. Brown and Levinson's (1987) well-known politeness theory provides an illustration. Those theorists contend that speakers and hearers both act to preserve and enhance their own and others' feelings of affiliation and autonomy. Brown and Levinson are explicit in their decision to leave open the question of whether individuals execute these actions with or without conscious awareness (p. 85). Can we be committed to goals of which we are unaware? Such a claim strikes me as oxymoronic. It appears that commitment has little or no role to play in theories that permit goals to exist outside the boundaries of awareness.

What Kind of Hierarchy?

The goal concept is hardly ever mentioned without being accompanied by the claim that goals exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another (e.g., Foss & Bower, 1986). There are at least two distinctly different conceptions of hierarchy in the goals literature.

One form of hierarchy, which may be referred to as the *levels* perspective, is based on the level of abstraction of the goal. For instance, in his work on personological issues, Emmons (1989) suggests four levels: *motives* (e.g., a desire for intimacy), *strivings* (e.g., get to know new people), *concerns* (e.g., determine how to answer advertisements in the Personals section of the newspaper), and *action units* (e.g., answer one of the Personals). Proponents of the levels perspective routinely create as many or as few levels as they view as pertinent to their analysis.

An alternative to the levels perspective is a simple two-step hierarchy that distinguishes only between the end-goal and all of the goals along the way that contribute to obtaining that end-goal. Benoit (1990) advocates this distinction in her discussion of *consummate* goals, or ultimate objectives, and *contributory* goals, or instrumental aims that advance movement toward the ultimate goal. Following Benoit, this is referred to here as the *consummatory* perspective. An example of the distinction can be seen in Schank and Abelson's (1977) work on scripts, goals, and plans.

Evaluation. Part of the difference between the levels and consummatory perspectives is that the consummatory permits two, and only two, levels in its hierarchy. Once the ultimate aim is established, all other relevant goals are conceptually subordinate to it. The levels perspective places no such restriction upon itself. Although different authors prefer varying numbers of layers in their own theorizing, there is no overarching principle that implies an optimal number. Some scholars lean toward a more detailed analysis than the earlier illustrations that I have provided. For example, Parks (1985) made use of a nine-level hierarchy in his analysis of communication competence (see also Carver & Scheier, 1982).

Another means of differentiating the two conceptions of hierarchy can be achieved by attending to the role played by time in each one. Hacker

(1985) comments eloquently on this issue when she says that goals "are reflections of a reality that does not yet exist, but has to be created, and they connect present with future" (p. 278). In the consummatory view, time exists as a line of variable length bounded on one end by development of the goal and on the other by the end-goal. Contributory goals are arrayed at various places on the line. This one dimension is all that is needed to illustrate the idea of hierarchy for the consummatory perspective.

In contrast, two dimensions are required to flesh out the levels perspective. Increasingly abstract goals not only subsume the goals beneath them in the hierarchy, but as movement up the goal structure takes place goals consume a larger portion of the time line. As the number of levels in the goal hierarchy increases, which is to say that as the generality of the top-level goal increases, the temporal length of the two-dimensional representation also increases. Hence, the length of time that is governed by a goal and its level of abstraction are positively correlated.

This partial confounding of time with abstraction might appear to be a theoretical liability. However, there is evidence from studies of the perception of action that the time/level correlation is not so much a conceptual weakness as an empirically reliable phenomenon. Support comes from a study by Wegner, Vallacher, and Kelly (1983, cited in Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). These researchers first developed a questionnaire composed of statements about getting married. Some of the statements reflected action identifications that were low in abstraction, such as "having pictures made" and "wearing a special outfit" while others represented higher level identities such as "showing love" and "making a mistake." Four groups of persons were asked to make judgments regarding how well each of the statements described the act of getting married. The four groups were differentiated in terms of their temporal distance from the act of marriage. One group made the judgments years before they were to marry, another group a month before they were to marry, a third group only a day before marriage, and a fourth group one month after having tied the knot. The results showed evidence of a curvilinear trend for the low-level act identities such that the closer persons were to marriage, the more likely they were to say that low-level statements such as "having pictures made" described the act of marriage.[1] Such findings are quite in line with the notion that low-level goals describe relatively brief segments of the timeline, whereas higher level goals encompass broader segments.

The decision to favor the consummatory perspective over the levels perspective seems to hinge upon the neatness and simplicity of the two-level

[1]There was also a linear trend for low-level act identities which can probably be explained by the fact that the four groups were not equidistant from the act of marriage (i.e., "years before," "a month before," "a day before," and "a month after"). Had there been a "years after" group, it seems likely that the linear trend would not have obtained.

approach. It does provide a straightforward method of assigning goals to categories especially when the consummatory goal is apparent. The levels approach, however, maintains the potential for a finer grained analysis by allowing for multiple layers in the hierarchy. Further, although it may not be as crisp a formulation as the consummatory approach, it has the advantage of reflecting an apparently reliable aspect of goal-driven behavior (i.e., the time-length correlation). Of course, the two approaches need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Hybrid models, that combine elements of both, are surely plausible.

Beyond Hierarchy. Regardless of whether one leans toward the levels perspective or the consummatory perspective, both should be recognized as simplifications. One complication arises from the fact that social actors often possess and attempt to achieve multiple goals more or less simultaneously (e.g., Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989; Tracy & Moran, 1983; Waldinger, 1977). As a means of emphasizing that action is almost invariably the result of multiple goals and, consequently, multiple goal hierarchies, Broadbent (1985) offers the term "heterarchy" (p. 290). In the production of a single utterance, we attempt to satisfy both semantic and syntactic goals (Greene, 1984). In the simple act of ending a conversation, we might act upon concerns of efficiency and social appropriateness (Kellermann, 1989). During the negotiation of an intimate relationship, we attend to the plausibility of lasting affection, the potential for rejection, and the prospect of disharmony. All of these examples suggest that a goal theorist would be unwise to limit him or herself to questions of hierarchy. Rather, one must ask what type of hierarchies are best suited to the research at hand, then locate that research within a context defined by multiple motivations.

Are Approach and Avoidance Goals Essentially Different?

Imagine two persons planning to deliver a public speech. One says to himself "I have to make sure that I don't get overanxious." The other says "I must try to remain calm throughout the speech." Although these two examples of self-talk seem to speak to the same goal, the first is framed as an avoidance goal (avoid anxiety), whereas the other is framed as an approach goal (seek calmness).

At first glance, the distinction may appear to be more of a play on words than a contrast of substance. But, such is not the case. In fact, the idea that motivational systems contain both approach and avoidance components is well established. Gray (1991) offers one convincing exposition of the position. Following his review of research, he concludes that separate approach and avoidance systems evolved in organisms ranging from fish to primates. These

systems are phylogenetically old and stable. Thus, far from being mere wordplay, there is a physiological basis for distinguishing approach and avoidance goals. Moreover, there are data that document social differences in the operation of approach and avoidance goals. Consider three examples:

1. People whose high-level goals are primarily avoidant have more memories of failed avoidance attempts and more distress about those events than do people whose high-level goals are mostly approach oriented (Singer & Salovey, 1993).
2. Individuals whose high-level goals are predominantly avoidant report lower levels of positive mood, less life satisfaction, and more anxiety when compared to persons whose motivations are primarily appetitive (Emmons & Kaiser, 1994).
3. Husbands' level of avoidant goals is positively associated with marital distress in their wives (King & Emmons, 1991).

Evaluation. The range-of-meaning criterion that I discussed earlier in this chapter calls for constructs to be delineated such that their contents are homogeneous. Yet, in principle, an infinite number of subdivisions are possible within any construct. So, we must ask which ones matter? The evidence suggests that the approach–avoidance distinction is worthy of thought. The fact that avoidance goals show different effects than approach goals is sufficient to demonstrate that this is a distinction that matters. Theorists need to analyze how the distinction is to be incorporated in their position. And, researchers must take care not to intermingle the two types unwittingly.

Do Goals Have Subcomponents?

Would it be advantageous to conceive of goals as having subcomponents? At least one writer thinks so. Pervin (1986) contends that goals possess cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. He also allows as to how these components may themselves vary in strength and the degree to which they contribute to any given goal. This provision for variability in the importance of the subcomponents produces some surprising conceptual outcomes. A goal with a strong affective component and a weak cognitive component is experienced as a wish or desire. In contrast, a goal whose cognitive component predominates ". . . has the quality of a belief" (Pervin, 1986, p. 98). Thus, variations in the strength of the subcomponents alters the phenomenological experience of the goal.

Evaluation. The scope of the goal construct is certainly broadened by the decision to constitute goals out of cognitions, affects, and behaviors. However, this approach is not without certain problems. For one, it becomes

difficult to distinguish the goal construct from concepts such as attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) that have been defined as the combination of three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (but see Zanna & Rempel, 1988, for a revision). Thus, the clarity-of-delineation criterion is not met.

Problems of scope also plague this tricomponential treatment of goal. Defined in this way, the scope of the goal construct becomes so vast as to encircle all motivational concepts. The question of what is not a goal becomes difficult to answer. As a result, the range of meaning is so great as to cloud interpretation of the construct.

Should We Distinguish Between Process and Outcome Goals?

When we speak of goals, the term routinely refers to some desired outcome. This use of the word can be seen in the research on affinity seeking (Bell & Daly, 1984). People often have the aim of making others like them. Of course, individuals have other types of goals too, such as gaining information (Berger, 1995), acquiring physical objects (Rule, Bisanz, & Kohn, 1985; Schank & Abelson, 1977), improving work performance (Erez & Rim 1982; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980), checking social reality (McCann & Higgins, 1988), and so on. All of these examples, and in fact a great deal of research, focus on the content goals, that is, *what* social actors are trying to accomplish. They are concerned with *outcome*.

An equally important question, but one that has received relatively less attention is that of *how* individuals seek to achieve the ends they desire. Here I am not concerned with substantive issues of strategy or tactics, but rather with the manner in which the *process* itself is instantiated. Possibly the clearest illustration of a process goal in found in the claim that individuals possess, to varying degrees, a desire for efficiency (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Blum-Kulka, Danet, & Gherson, 1985; Kellermann, 1989). The notion that individuals may decide to pursue outcome goals with varying degrees of vigor or tenacity also helps to convey some of the flavor of process concerns (Wiemann & Daly, 1994).

Evaluation. The distinction between process and outcome goals is intuitively appealing and probably one that deserves further analysis. However, application of the process–outcome distinction requires some appreciation of the context in which the distinction is to be drawn. My point here is that some content goals, such as impression management, may assume either process or outcome status depending on the context in which they occur. The salesperson bent on unloading his merchandise attempts to create liking for instrumental reasons. In this instance, impression management is process. However, it is often the case that people try to engender liking for its own sake. Thus, impression management is an outcome goal. As always, context matters.

In both of the previous examples, outcome refers to the end-goal while process refers to those things that happen in the service of obtaining the end-goal. It might appear that the process–outcome distinction is redundant with the consummatory perspective on goal hierarchy: Process goals are contributory and outcome goals are consummatory. But, the redundancy is only superficial. The process goals of efficiency and vigor reside at a loftier tier in the goal hierarchy than any particular outcome goal that they might influence. Contributory goals, in contrast, must be located below consummatory goals. So, the two distinctions, outcome/process and contributory/consummatory, are not wholly redundant. However, their apparent similarity suggests that clarity of delineation might be enhanced by considering the distinctions jointly.

To What Extent Should Goals Exhibit Specificity?

Goal specificity may be defined as ". . . the degree of quantitative precision with which the aim [goal] is specified" (Locke et al., 1981, p. 126). Accordingly, a goal of increasing production by 10 units is more specific than a goal of increasing production by between 8 and 12 units. And, the 8–12 goal is more specific than "Do your best."

At first glance it might seem that specific goals are simply those that reside near the base of a goal hierarchy. This impression is inaccurate. Specificity is distinct from hierarchy. Proof of the difference can be seen by comparing the intentions of two hypothetical students. Whereas one might seek simply to raise her GPA, another could have the goal of increasing her GPA to a 3.5. Because these goals will require much time (at least one semester) and a myriad of actions, they are necessarily close to the top of a goal hierarchy. Thus, while they differ in specificity, they are similar in level of abstraction. The conceptual distinctiveness of specificity provides part of the grounds for the attention that it receives here. Its empirical effects supply the remaining justification.

Virtually all of the work on goal specificity resides within the organizational behavior literature. From that body of work, one especially robust finding has emerged: Specific goals produce better task performance than ambiguous goals (Mento, Steel, & Karren, 1987). There are several reasons that this should be the case. First, because goals direct attention, as they become more specific, the resulting actions should also become more focused (Beehr & Love, 1983). Second, because goals stimulate the development of planning, specific goals should give rise to task strategies that are closely aligned with those goals (Earley & Perry, 1987). Third, goal specificity reduces ambiguity in evaluating goal attainment (Campion & Lord, 1982). Finally, when goals are made public, specific goals make it a simple matter for onlookers to evaluate an individual's level of success with regard to the goal (Naylor & Ilgen, 1984). To varying degrees, all four of these processes may be mediated by a construct that is the focus of an earlier section of this chapter: goal commitment (Wright & Kacmar, 1994).

Organizational behavior scholars value goal specificity because of its implications for productivity enhancement. People who commit to specific goals work harder than those who possess diffuse goals. Why, then, do people resist formulating precise goals (Reither & Staudel, 1985)? Probably for the same reasons that specific goals prompt effort. First, because goals direct attention and stimulate planning, they instigate the expenditure of effort. To the extent that people prefer to conserve energic resources, they should resist goal specificity. Second, because specific goals channel thought and action, they reduce flexibility. Commitment to one course of action creates opportunity costs in terms of foregoing the alternative courses of action. Third, because goal specificity clarifies progress toward the goal, one's failures become more salient and more resistant to retrospective reinterpretation (e.g., "Oh, that wasn't all that important anyway. I didn't really care about it"). Moreover, clear failure produces negative affect to a much greater degree than uncertain failure (Segrin & Dillard, 1991). Finally, when specific goals are made public, they allow others to evaluate our progress and to demand that we behave consistently with our stated aims. Ambiguous goal statements have the often desirable property of plausible deniability (Eisenberg, 1984).

Evaluation. The notion of specificity surfaced and matured within the confines of the organizational behavior literature. The emphasis on task achievement inherent in that literature made organizational behavior a nurturing environment for the analysis of specificity effects. In contrast, communication researchers have not shown much interest in questions concerning goal specificity. Does this apparent indifference result from design or from oversight? It may stem from the fact that many goals that are relevant to social interaction seem to resist quantification. We rarely encounter individuals who hold goals such as "I plan to increase my partner's liking for me by 2 units on a 7-point scale." Instead, we are more likely to see studies in which one participant tries to make the other like him more (e.g., Palmer & Simmons, 1995) or gather as much information as possible (e.g., Kellermann & Berger, 1984). This apparent predilection for nonspecific goals may reflect an appreciation for the phenomenology of the social actor. Perhaps we study nonspecific goals because that is the natural form of communicative goals.

Apart from current practice, *should* we study goal specificity? The empirical findings regarding the influence of specificity on task behavior imply a durable effect. The effect may also be sufficiently general as to encompass a variety of communication phenomena. Can we train individuals to form

specific communication goals within skill domains such as public speaking, small group discussion, and conflict management? And, if so, will specific goals produce effects similar to those documented by students of organizational behavior? These questions all suggest the potential benefit of granting greater attention to goal specificity.

Summary

Thus far I have presented seven questions about goals and discussed their implications in terms of clarity of delineation, range of meaning, and specification of subcomponents. The questions vary considerably in importance and some of them overlap with others. Nonetheless, they are all useful questions in that they encourage careful construct development. In the next section, I take up some of the issues concerned with operationalization.

OPERATIONALIZING "GOALS"

The plausibility of any test of theory is constrained by the validity with which the constructs are operationalized. However, there is great diversity of opinion on what passes for "plausible." In what follows, I describe two general approaches to operationalizing goals, then attempt to enumerate some of the threats to inference associated with each of them. Additionally, I try to make clear how earlier-drawn distinctions might nudge a researcher toward one or the other type of operationalization.

Inference From Self-Report

If we are willing to assume that goals are accessible to consciousness or can be made accessible, then it is possible to assess goals in a fairly direct manner; that is, by self-report. This method has been used to assess goals prior to action (Greene & Lindsey, 1989) and after the action has occurred (Dillard et al., 1989). It has been applied to naturally occurring goals and to experimentally induced goals (e.g., Palmer & Simmons, 1995). Thus, one virtue of the self-report approach is its generality.

Of course, self-reports of goals are not immune to problems of inference. It is often noted that one of the potential threats to validity is prevarication. For fear of appearing undesirable, individuals may shade descriptions of their true intentions or fabricate them altogether (Craig, 1986). In my estimation, this is a problem that is fairly well addressed through assurances of confidentiality or guarantees of anonymity. Perhaps a more likely threat is that individuals will deceive *themselves* concerning the real motives for their behavior. They will deny to themselves that their motivations might

be aggressive, deceitful, or unethical. However, if we accept self-duplicity about one's goals as a real possibility, then we have shifted our perspective on goal awareness from the inside-only position to the outside-in or inside-out positions. These latter two positions allow as to how goals might exist outside of consciousness, thereby allowing action to be motivated by a goal of which the actor was unaware.

It is surely the case that as distance between time and action increases, individuals' conceptions of their own goals change. Multiple processes are in operation. Intentions regarding future behavior may be influenced by hopes and dreams. Circumstances may change such that unforeseen obstacles to goal completion become apparent. And, as noted in the discussion of hierarchy, as the temporal distance between motive and behavior grows larger, the goal that governs the action becomes more abstract (within the phenomenology of the actor; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). In addition, recollections of one's goals are colored by the degree of success one had in attaining the goal. All of these concerns argue for assessing goals as close in time to the action under study as is possible.

Waldron and Cegala (1992) offer a thoughtful analysis of three methods of assessing goals as they occur in conversation. The three methods are concurrent verbalization, thought checklists, and videotaped stimulated recall. It is worth noting that the procedures they consider require only that goals *can be* made accessible to consciousness. Methods such as stimulated recall, that is, viewing a videotape of an interaction in which the subject provides data on his or her cognitions at various points in the interaction, allow subjects to voice thoughts that might *not* have been clear, well-formed intentions at the time of action. Thus, the methods are not limited to an inside-only perspective, but might be used by researchers who adopt one of the less stringent positions on awareness relative to the goal construct.

Inference From Circumstance

Theorists who take the position that goals are, or may be, unconscious often infer backwards from the action to the goal (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987). Such inference from behavior to goal can be risky business. In fact, some would call it just plain *bad* business. "Intention cannot be inferred from actions: otherwise, it would provide a circular explanation in which the same event is taken as evidence of both cause and effect" (Bandura, 1986, p. 468). In the next section, I explore some of the challenges to action-to-goal inferences.

Canonical Problems of Action-Goal Inferences. Every researcher who would desire to infer goals from behavior is faced with problems of two sorts. For one, different goals might generate the same action. Borrowing from the language of systems theory, we might term this the *problem of*

equifinality.[2] As an example, consider that individuals make use of metaphor to achieve five distinct ends: to give the appearance of eloquence, to compare similarities between two ideas, to make their talk more interesting, to provoke thought, and to clarify their intended meaning (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). So, upon observation of a person uttering a metaphor which of the alternative motivations should we infer? In the absence of any other information, the problem of inference is intractable. And that is the simple case! This predicament looms even larger if one is willing to make the now commonplace assumption that individuals possess and act on multiple goals. It is no longer of a question of inferring *one* goal from a behavior, but a combination of goals.

Another problem is that different actions might be generated by the same goal. Persons who aim to clarify the meaning of an utterance indicate that they achieve that end through a variety of linguistic means: hyperbole, irony, metaphor, simile, idiom, and rhetorical questions (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). Borrowing again from systems theory, this is the *problem of equipotentiality*.

Clearly, the challenge faced by the researcher is that there are simply too many possibilities to make any kind of claim with certainty. But, how might one go about enhancing the plausibility of an action-to-goal inference? There are several possibilities.

Solution 1: Eliminate Alternatives. The application of this strategy takes several forms, one of which is apparent in politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The theory proposes that everyone possesses a desire for affiliation/inclusion (i.e., roughly positive face) and a desire for autonomy (i.e., roughly negative face). When an individual attempts to change the behavior of another, one or both of these desires may be threatened. Consequently, speakers create utterances to save their own and other's face. A phrase such as, "I'm sorry to bother you, but . . ." apparently attempts to mitigate the hearer's desire for autonomy by recognizing the intrusion. The researcher might then infer that it arises from the goal of saving negative face. The inference process is simplified by the fact that the theory proposes the existence of only two, mutually exclusive goals. In this instance, alternative goals are eliminated by theoretical decree.

Another application of the Eliminate Alternatives strategy is achieved by selecting or controlling the context in which the communication occurs. This is a common approach among discourse analysts who attempt to interpret the implicit functions of speech within highly specific contexts such as the

[2]I've taken some liberty with shades of meaning in my use of these terms. Within systems theory, equifinality and equipotentiality are not seen as properties of problems, but as properties of systems. The concepts are used here to highlight the difficulties of inference that are faced by an observer (the researcher) attempting to understand the workings of the system.

courtroom (Nofsinger, 1983). Whereas discourse analysts typically favor naturally occurring contexts, it is possible to *create* contexts that effectively limit the number of goals that might be in operation. Charlesworth and La Freniere (1983) utilized this approach in their work on resource acquisition. The paradigm places children in a playroom in groups of four. A movie apparatus is present that allows the children to operate in 1 of 3 positions. Through a peephole, one child can view a cartoon movie. This can be accomplished only in cooperation with two other persons. One of the two must turn the crank that causes the filmstrip to move, while the other is needed to press a button that activates the light needed to illuminate the film. The remaining child becomes a bystander. This laboratory setting simplifies the inference problem in two ways. By creating a relatively sterile environment, it eliminates many potential goals. By making certain resources salient, it enhances the likelihood that particular goals will be activated.

Solution 2: Look for Patterns of Behavior. Social actors are often inexplicit about their wants: they beat around the bush, they deny the apparent meaning of their utterance, they say that they did not anticipate the implications of an action. One way in which we solve the attributional dilemma of why-they-did-what-they-did is to look for patterns in the behavior of others. But what kind of patterns?

Some reflection on the meaning of motive (i.e., goal, broadly construed) helps to frame an answer to that question. It is widely accepted that motives influence behavior in three ways. First, motives encourage individuals to choose one course of action over the alternatives. Second, motives energize behavior. This effect can be seen in the intensity or frequency with which actions are performed. Third, when obstacles are present, motives are thought to underlie the persistence with which the individual executes the action. As a general rule, an action-to-goal inference should be stronger to the extent that a pattern can be observed over more, rather than fewer, of these dimensions of behavior. The implications for research design are straightforward:

1. Patterns cannot be seen in isolated utterances. Collect enough message data so that it is possible for patterns to emerge.

2. To the extent that individuals have a range of behavioral options, the act of selecting one becomes more meaningful. Provide individuals with a range of communicative choices.

3. The frequency or intensity of an action can only be judged if one is clear about the unit of behavior. Investigations of message tactics focus on smaller units than studies of message strategies. Construct the sample of behavior such that the largest unit under study has room to vary in frequency or intensity (whichever aspect of behavior is of interest).

4. Often motives do not manifest themselves until they are endangered. One reason that request behavior has been the locus of so much politeness research is that threats to both positive and negative face are likely in that communicative locale. Find or construct situations in which the goals of the social actor are likely to encounter obstacles.

Solution 3: Settle for Weaker Inference. Although most scientific research on message production aspires to empirically valid accounts of how and why messages are formed, this is not the aim of all inquiry. Rather, some writers seek only to demonstrate that their interpretation of a phenomenon is plausible, that a body of discourse *could be* given a particular reading (Stubbs, 1983). Though many would disagree with me, I see this as a much weaker form of explanation than the social scientific standard. Still, such research is not without value. Work conducted from this perspective is often insightful and can provide the basis for generating rigorously testable explanations. Moreover, such research is often a rich source of example and can be used to vivify the account of a message production process. Finally, such research might be used fruitfully in conjunction with more rigorous methods and in this way provide an excellent complement to standard procedures. In communication in general, and in message production in particular, we have no tools of inference so strong that we can afford wholesale dismissal of complementary methods.

A PROPOSAL

Current theories of message production make heavy use of the goal concept. And, the empirical findings suggest that this heavy use is justified; the results of a great many studies indicate strong and reliable relationships between goals and the messages that follow from them (e.g., Dillard, 1989). But, the goal concept could be harnessed in such a way as to pull even greater theoretical weight than it does currently. In addition to serving as an explanatory mechanism *within* theories, goals might be used define research domains. Rather than discuss compliance-seeking as if it were a single, homogeneous social sphere, it would be valuable to, distinguish, for example, between gaining assistance and giving, two different influence goals. The virtues of such an approach are numerous.

One such virtue is that goals are the proximal causes of communication behavior. Early studies of message production, especially studies of influence messages, couched their questions in terms of situational and individual difference variables. Many judged these efforts as unsatisfactory because the results they produced failed to coalesce into a coherent body knowledge (Berger, 1985; Boster, 1995). The shortcomings of these variable-analytic

approaches were twofold. Whereas individual differences might assess what persons typically do or want, they measured features of individuals in the abstract, apart from the needs of the moment. And, although situations provided both opportunities and constraints, they gave no hint as to what the individual sought to achieve within the structure provided by those opportunities and constraints. The addition of the goal construct to theories of message production solved these problems by moving the explanatory mechanism closer to the phenomenon of interest.

Moreover, goals provide a parsimonious means for summarizing social reality. This is true in several senses. Consider that interactants typically possess a primary goal (i.e., the goal that defines and motivates the interaction sequence) and one or more secondary goals (i.e., goals that arise from an attempt to achieve the primary goal). For instance, the professor attempting to steer a student gently toward a valuable research project must balance her desire for effectiveness against the student's right to choose. And, in general, primary goals tend to be accompanied by specific configurations of secondary goals (Schrader & Dillard, 1996). Thus, knowledge of the primary goal provides knowledge of the secondary goals that are likely to be activated. Furthermore, certain types of goals tend to cooccur with specific individuals (Miller, Cody, & McLaughlin, 1994). People seek assistance from siblings and peers. They seek permission from persons in positions of power. In sum, knowledge of the actor's primary goal has strong implications for the other concerns that an actor is likely to possess as well as his or her relationship with other interactant.

Using goals to organize inquiry has the additional virtue of encouraging a dynamic approach to the study of communication. Whereas traditional definitions implicitly assume that the situation is static for the duration of the interaction, a goal-based approach recognizes that what an individual is trying to achieve may vary from moment to moment as opportunities and constraints unfold during social discourse. An interaction originally motivated by one party's desire to change the opinion of the other may change course when the message target reacts with disbelief to the audacity of the source. In this instance, the source's primary goal may shift from one of influence to one of relational repair. Though brief, these three arguments make a compelling case for a goal-based approach to inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Constructs, like theories and people, have life cycles. It is often the case that a construct in born is response to the perceived inadequacies of existing constructs. It may then "live" until its own faults become apparent, at which time it is replaced by a new, and one hopes, improved construct. My aim

in this chapter is not to rush the goal construct toward its grave. Rather, I hope that making clear the choice points associated with the construct, it will help to ensure a long and productive life for the notion of goal.

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