

Goals in Motion: A Recursive Theory of Goal Persistence, Revision, and Disengagement

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Article

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Abstract

Why do some goals persist while others are revised or abandoned? Existing research has generated substantial insights into goal commitment, self-regulation, and performance, yet goal persistence, revision, and disengagement are often explained within separate theoretical traditions. As a result, the dynamic processes through which goals evolve over time remain insufficiently integrated. This paper develops a recursive theory of goal pursuit that explains these outcomes within a unified framework. The paper introduces the 5S model, consisting of five interconnected stages: Situation, Salience, Simulation, Selection, and Satisfaction. Individuals interpret their circumstances, identify salient concerns, construct alternative futures through simulation, select among these possibilities, and evaluate outcomes through satisfaction. Evaluative feedback subsequently reshapes situational perceptions and initiates new cycles of simulation and selection. The central argument is that goal persistence, revision, and disengagement emerge as alternative trajectories of a common process of recursive adaptation. Persistence occurs when evaluation continues to support an existing commitment. Revision occurs when newly simulated futures become more desirable, feasible, or self-consistent than previously selected goals. Disengagement occurs when evaluative feedback persistently undermines commitment to a selected future. By integrating insights from goal-setting research, self-determination theory, self-regulation, future-oriented cognition, and goal adjustment research, the 5S model provides a dynamic account of how goals are continuously reproduced, modified, and abandoned over time. More broadly, the paper argues that goal pursuit is best understood not as the pursuit of fixed objectives but as an ongoing process of recursive adaptation through which goals remain in motion.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of goals is a defining feature of human behavior. Individuals establish aspirations concerning education, careers, health, relationships, and personal development, and these aspirations shape decisions across multiple domains of life. Yet goals rarely remain fixed over time. Some goals persist despite repeated obstacles and setbacks. Others are revised as individuals encounter new opportunities and changing circumstances. Still others are eventually abandoned and replaced by alternative aspirations. Understanding why goals persist, change, and disappear is therefore a fundamental challenge for psychological research.

Over the past several decades, goal-setting research has generated substantial insights into motivation, self-regulation, and performance. Goal Setting Theory has demonstrated the importance of goal specificity and difficulty for achievement (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). Self-Determination Theory has emphasized the role of intrinsic motivation and psychological needs in sustaining goal commitment (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Research on mental contrasting and implementation intentions has identified cognitive mechanisms that strengthen commitment and facilitate goal attainment (Gollwitzer, 1999; Oettingen et al., 2001; Oettingen, 2012). Together, these approaches have significantly advanced understanding of how individuals pursue goals and maintain effort over time.

Despite these contributions, existing theories provide only partial explanations of how goals evolve. Much of the literature focuses on goals that have already been established and seeks to explain the conditions under which those goals are successfully pursued. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the processes through which goals are maintained, modified, or abandoned in response to experience. While persistence, goal adjustment, and goal disengagement have each been examined in their own right (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch et al., 2003; Heckhausen et al., 2010), these phenomena are often treated as distinct outcomes rather than as components of a common process of goal pursuit.

This limitation is increasingly important because contemporary life is characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and a growing range of possible futures (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992). Educational pathways, career trajectories, lifestyles, and personal identities are rarely predetermined. Individuals frequently encounter situations in which previously valued goals become unattainable, new opportunities emerge, or changing circumstances alter priorities and aspirations. Under such conditions, understanding goal pursuit requires more than explaining commitment to existing goals. It requires explaining how goals themselves change over time.

Existing approaches leave three important questions unresolved. First, the relationship between goal formation and goal change remains underdeveloped. Many theories explain either how goals are selected or how they are pursued, but fewer explain how goals evolve after commitment has been established. Goal persistence, revision, and disengagement are often studied separately despite their apparent interconnectedness.

Second, the role of future simulation remains theoretically ambiguous. Research on mental contrasting, affective forecasting, and future-oriented cognition has demonstrated that imagining future outcomes influences motivation and behavior (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Oettingen, 2012; Schacter et al., 2008). However, simulation is frequently conceptualized as a mechanism that supports pre-existing goals. Less attention has been devoted to its role in generating alternative futures that may reinforce, modify, or replace existing commitments.

Third, existing theories often portray goal pursuit as a relatively linear process. Goals are established, pursued, and eventually achieved or abandoned. Such models provide important insights into motivation and performance, but they offer less explanation for how goals are repeatedly reconstructed through ongoing evaluation and adaptation. Taken together, these limitations point toward the need for a more dynamic framework capable of explaining not only how goals are pursued but also how they persist, change, and disappear.

This paper develops a recursive theory of goal pursuit centered on the dynamics of goal persistence, revision, and disengagement. It introduces the 5S model, a framework consisting of five interconnected stages: Situation, Salience, Simulation, Selection, and Satisfaction. The model begins with the individual's interpretation of a situation. Particular concerns then become salient, directing attention toward specific domains of future action. Individuals subsequently construct alternative futures through

simulation and select among these possibilities. The outcomes of goal-directed action are then evaluated through satisfaction, generating feedback that reshapes future perceptions, priorities, and simulations.

The central argument of the paper is that goal persistence, revision, and disengagement emerge from recursive cycles of simulation and evaluation. Goals are not fixed commitments that simply endure until they are achieved or abandoned. Rather, they are continuously reproduced, modified, and reconstructed as individuals interpret experiences, imagine alternative futures, and reassess prior commitments. Persistence occurs when repeated evaluations continue to support an existing goal. Revision occurs when alternative futures become more compelling than previously selected trajectories. Disengagement occurs when evaluative feedback persistently undermines the desirability, feasibility, or self-consistency of a goal.

The paper makes three contributions to goal-setting research. First, it provides a unified framework for understanding goal persistence, revision, and disengagement as outcomes of a common process rather than as separate phenomena. Second, it identifies simulation as the mechanism through which alternative futures are generated and evaluated throughout the goal pursuit process. Third, it reconceptualizes goal pursuit as a recursive cycle of interpretation, simulation, selection, action, and evaluation, thereby extending existing theories of self-regulation and goal adjustment (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Heckhausen et al., 2010).

By integrating goal formation, goal pursuit, and goal change within a single framework, the 5S model offers a dynamic account of how individuals navigate uncertain futures and continuously reconstruct the goals that guide their lives.

2. Goal Persistence and Commitment in Existing Research

Research on goal pursuit has generated substantial insights into the processes through which individuals maintain effort, sustain commitment, and achieve desired outcomes. Across diverse theoretical traditions, scholars have examined why some goals remain stable over time, why individuals persist despite obstacles, and how motivation contributes to successful goal attainment. These contributions have significantly advanced understanding of goal-directed behavior and self-regulation.

At the same time, existing approaches tend to focus on particular stages or aspects of goal pursuit. Some theories emphasize the characteristics of goals that promote persistence, whereas others focus on the motivational conditions that sustain commitment. As a result, persistence and commitment are often explained separately from broader processes of goal change. Questions concerning how goals are revised, redirected, or abandoned over time remain comparatively underdeveloped.

This section reviews two influential traditions that have shaped contemporary research on goal pursuit: Goal Setting Theory and Self-Determination Theory. These perspectives provide important explanations

of persistence and commitment, but they also reveal the need for a more dynamic framework capable of explaining how goals evolve through ongoing cycles of experience and evaluation.

2.1 Goal Setting Theory and Goal Persistence

Goal Setting Theory represents one of the most influential approaches to understanding goal-directed behavior (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). The theory argues that specific and challenging goals improve performance by directing attention, mobilizing effort, increasing persistence, and encouraging the development of effective strategies. Rather than treating motivation as a general psychological state, Goal Setting Theory identifies characteristics of goals themselves as key determinants of behavior.

A central contribution of this literature is its explanation of goal persistence. Research consistently demonstrates that specific and difficult goals encourage individuals to maintain effort over extended periods, even when obstacles and setbacks are encountered (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002, 2006). Clear goals provide standards against which progress can be evaluated, thereby sustaining attention and effort throughout the pursuit process. In this respect, Goal Setting Theory offers one of the most influential accounts of why individuals remain committed to particular objectives over time.

The theory also emphasizes the importance of feedback. Information concerning progress allows individuals to evaluate performance and adjust effort accordingly (Locke & Latham, 2002). Persistence therefore depends not only on goal characteristics but also on the availability of information regarding movement toward desired outcomes.

Despite these contributions, Goal Setting Theory primarily explains the maintenance of existing goals rather than their transformation. Goals are generally treated as stable objects of commitment whose characteristics influence subsequent behavior. The theory provides powerful explanations of why individuals persist in pursuing selected goals, but it offers less insight into why goals are revised, redirected, or abandoned. As a result, persistence appears as the continuation of commitment rather than as one possible outcome of a broader process of goal dynamics.

From the perspective of the present study, persistence is an important phenomenon, but it represents only one possible trajectory of goal pursuit. Individuals frequently encounter situations in which goals change, and explaining these changes requires moving beyond models that primarily focus on the consequences of goal commitment.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory and Goal Commitment

Self-Determination Theory approaches goal-directed behavior from the perspective of motivation and psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to the theory, human behavior is shaped by the degree to which actions are experienced as autonomous, competent, and socially connected. Goals differ not only in their content but also in the extent to which they are internally endorsed and integrated into the self.

One of the major strengths of Self-Determination Theory is its explanation of goal commitment. The theory argues that goals aligned with intrinsic interests and fundamental psychological needs generate stronger and more enduring engagement than goals motivated primarily by external rewards or social pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Commitment is therefore understood not simply as persistence of behavior but as a consequence of the quality of motivation underlying goal pursuit.

Research within this tradition has demonstrated that self-endorsed goals are associated with greater persistence, well-being, and long-term achievement. Individuals are more likely to sustain effort when goals are experienced as personally meaningful and congruent with their values and identities. Self-Determination Theory thus provides an important account of why some goals maintain motivational force over time while others lose their influence.

Nevertheless, the theory focuses primarily on explaining the strength and quality of commitment once goals have been adopted. Less attention is devoted to understanding how commitments change in response to experience. While the framework recognizes that motivational orientations may evolve, it offers a less developed account of how individuals revise goals, abandon prior aspirations, or redirect effort toward alternative futures.

Consequently, Self-Determination Theory provides valuable insights into the foundations of commitment but leaves open broader questions concerning the dynamics of goal change. Understanding why individuals maintain commitment is important, but understanding how commitments are reconstructed over time requires a more comprehensive process perspective.

2.3 Goal Adjustment Research: Revision and Disengagement

While Goal Setting Theory and Self-Determination Theory primarily explain persistence and commitment, a third stream of research has focused more directly on how individuals respond when goals become difficult, unattainable, or no longer desirable. This literature on goal adjustment examines the processes through which people revise, disengage from, and replace existing goals in response to changing circumstances (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch et al., 2003; Heckhausen et al., 2010).

One influential contribution comes from Brandtstädter and Renner's (1990) distinction between assimilative and accommodative coping. Assimilative processes involve persistent efforts to maintain existing goals despite obstacles, whereas accommodative processes involve modifying goals and aspirations in response to constraints. This distinction highlights the adaptive value of flexibility when circumstances make previously desired outcomes difficult to achieve.

Related research by Wrosch and colleagues (2003, 2007) has demonstrated that disengagement from unattainable goals can contribute positively to psychological well-being. Rather than representing simple failure, goal disengagement may allow individuals to redirect effort and attention toward more

achievable and meaningful pursuits. The capacity to relinquish unattainable goals has been associated with reduced stress, improved emotional adjustment, and greater adaptive functioning.

Similarly, Heckhausen and colleagues (2010) have emphasized the importance of adaptive developmental regulation throughout the life course. Individuals continually adjust goals in response to changing opportunities, constraints, and life circumstances. Goal pursuit therefore involves not only commitment and persistence but also ongoing processes of reassessment and adaptation.

This literature represents an important advance because it recognizes that goals are not static. Individuals frequently revise aspirations, redirect effort, and disengage from previously valued objectives. Goal pursuit is therefore characterized by change as well as continuity. Nevertheless, existing research on goal adjustment tends to examine persistence, revision, and disengagement as distinct outcomes. The literature provides valuable insights into when and why individuals modify goals, but it offers less explanation of how these outcomes emerge from a common underlying process. Persistence, revision, and disengagement are often analyzed separately rather than as interconnected trajectories within a broader dynamic system of goal pursuit.

As a result, goal adjustment research significantly advances understanding of goal change while leaving unresolved questions concerning the mechanisms that connect goal persistence, revision, and disengagement within a unified framework.

2.4 The Missing Integration

Taken together, existing approaches provide complementary insights into goal-directed behavior. Goal Setting Theory explains why individuals persist in pursuing challenging goals. Self-Determination Theory explains why some goals generate stronger commitment than others. Goal adjustment research explains how individuals revise or disengage from goals when circumstances change.

Despite their strengths, these approaches remain only partially integrated. Persistence, commitment, revision, and disengagement are typically treated as separate phenomena explained by different theoretical mechanisms. As a result, existing research provides detailed accounts of particular outcomes while offering less understanding of how these outcomes are related.

More fundamentally, most theories implicitly treat goals as relatively stable objects. Whether explaining persistence, commitment, or disengagement, the primary focus is often on responses to goals that have already been established. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the processes through which goals are continuously reconstructed through experience. The dynamic relationship between goal formation, goal maintenance, and goal change therefore remains insufficiently theorized.

A further limitation concerns the role of future-oriented cognition. Research on possible selves, future simulation, mental contrasting, and prospective cognition demonstrates that individuals regularly imagine alternative futures and use those imagined futures to guide behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oettingen, 2012; Schacter et al., 2008; Seligman et al., 2013). Yet these insights have rarely been

integrated with theories of persistence, revision, and disengagement. Consequently, the role of simulation in shaping the evolution of goals remains unclear.

The present paper addresses these limitations by developing a recursive theory of goal pursuit centered on the dynamics of goal change. Rather than treating persistence, revision, and disengagement as distinct phenomena, the proposed framework conceptualizes them as alternative outcomes of a common process. Goals are understood not as fixed targets but as evolving commitments continuously reproduced, modified, or abandoned through cycles of situational interpretation, salience formation, simulation, selection, and evaluative feedback.

The following sections introduce the 5S model and show how goal persistence, revision, and disengagement can be understood as emergent outcomes of a unified process of recursive adaptation.

3. The 5S Model of Goal Pursuit

This section develops the theoretical core of the paper. The 5S model conceptualizes goal pursuit as a dynamic process consisting of five interrelated stages: Situation, Salience, Simulation, Selection, and Satisfaction. Rather than treating goals as pre-existing objects of choice, the model explains how goals emerge, are pursued, and are continuously revised through interactions between individuals and their environments.

The central premise of the framework is that goal pursuit begins not with goal selection but with the interpretation of a situation. Individuals encounter particular circumstances, identify aspects of those circumstances that are personally significant, imagine possible futures, select among alternative courses of action, and evaluate the outcomes of their decisions. Goal formation and goal pursuit are therefore understood as components of a broader process through which individuals navigate an uncertain and evolving environment.

The five stages are analytically distinct but recursively connected. Satisfaction with outcomes influences subsequent perceptions of situations, generating new cycles of salience formation, simulation, and selection. Goal pursuit is therefore not a linear sequence but an ongoing process of adaptation and evaluation.

[Insert Fig. 1 about here.]

3.1 Situation

The first stage of the model concerns the individual's perception and interpretation of the current situation. Before goals can be formed or pursued, individuals must develop an understanding of the circumstances in which they are embedded. Situations provide the context within which possible futures become imaginable and meaningful (Bandura, 1985; Carver & Scheier, 1998).

A situation encompasses a wide range of factors, including personal capabilities, available resources, environmental constraints, social relationships, and institutional conditions. Individuals may assess their educational background, financial resources, professional experience, health status, family responsibilities, or opportunities available within their surrounding environment. These factors shape what appears possible, desirable, or necessary at a given point in time (Bandura, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Importantly, situations are not objective collections of facts. The same external circumstances may be interpreted differently by different individuals. A demanding job may be viewed as a source of opportunity by one person and as a source of stress by another. Similarly, limited financial resources may be perceived either as a temporary challenge or as a significant barrier to future aspirations. Situation therefore refers not simply to external conditions but to the individual's cognitive representation of those conditions (Bandura, 1985; Carver & Scheier, 1998).

Situational awareness plays a foundational role because it establishes the informational basis upon which subsequent stages depend. Without some understanding of current circumstances, individuals cannot meaningfully evaluate possible futures or formulate goals. Goal formation therefore begins with the perception and interpretation of the present rather than with the direct selection of future outcomes. This emphasis is consistent with broader perspectives in self-regulation research that view behavior as guided by ongoing monitoring and interpretation of current states relative to desired conditions (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998).

At the same time, situations rarely dictate specific goals. Individuals exposed to similar circumstances often pursue very different futures. The reason is that situations contain numerous potential concerns, opportunities, and challenges, only some of which become psychologically significant. The transition from situation to goal formation therefore requires an additional mechanism through which certain aspects of experience become prioritized. This mechanism is captured by the concept of salience.

3.2 Salience

The second stage of the model concerns the emergence of salience. Salience refers to the process through which particular concerns, values, needs, or opportunities become psychologically prominent within a broader situation. While situations contain a large amount of information, only a limited subset attracts attention and becomes relevant for subsequent decision-making (Higgins, 1996, 1997; Kahneman, 2012).

Salience functions as a mechanism of prioritization. Individuals do not respond equally to every aspect of their environment. Instead, they selectively attend to issues that are perceived as important, urgent, desirable, or personally meaningful. Concerns related to health, career advancement, family relationships, financial security, social recognition, or self-development may become salient depending on the individual's circumstances and experiences. This selective orientation is consistent with research

showing that motivational systems direct attention toward goals and concerns that are perceived as relevant to the self (Higgins, 1987, 1997).

The emergence of salience explains why individuals exposed to similar situations frequently develop different goals. Consider two individuals working in the same organization. One may become primarily concerned with promotion and professional achievement, while another may become increasingly focused on work-life balance or family commitments. Although the situational conditions are comparable, different aspects of those conditions acquire psychological significance. Such variation reflects differences in personal values, self-concepts, and motivational orientations (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Salience is therefore the process through which potential concerns are transformed into focal concerns. It narrows the range of possibilities that individuals consider and directs attention toward particular domains of future action. In this sense, salience provides the motivational orientation that precedes goal formation. Rather than responding to all available information, individuals selectively organize experience around concerns that appear most relevant to their current circumstances and desired futures.

Most importantly, salience determines which futures become candidates for simulation. Individuals do not imagine every possible future. Rather, they selectively construct future scenarios around issues that have already acquired personal significance. Concerns about health generate simulations of healthier lifestyles; concerns about career advancement generate simulations of professional futures; concerns about personal fulfillment generate simulations of alternative life trajectories. Salience therefore serves as the bridge between situational awareness and future-oriented cognition.

Without salience, simulation would lack direction. Individuals would possess information about their circumstances but no basis for identifying which possibilities deserve further exploration. Salience thus provides the motivational focus that guides the construction of imagined futures and sets the stage for the simulation process discussed in the next section.

3.3 Simulation

Simulation constitutes the central mechanism of the 5S model. Following the emergence of salience, individuals do not immediately select goals. Rather, they construct and explore possible future states through mental simulation. Simulation refers to the cognitive process through which individuals imagine alternative futures, anticipate potential outcomes, and evaluate possible trajectories of action before committing to a particular course of behavior (Szpunar, 2010; Schacter et al., 2008; Seligman et al., 2013).

Existing goal-setting research has frequently examined simulation as a tool for pursuing already established goals. Studies of mental contrasting, implementation intentions, and future-oriented cognition generally assume that a goal exists prior to simulation and investigate how imagining future outcomes influences commitment, effort, or persistence (Gollwitzer, 1999; Oettingen et al., 2001;

Oettingen, 2012). In this view, the causal sequence is relatively straightforward: individuals first select a goal and subsequently use simulation to support its achievement.

The present framework proposes a different sequence. Rather than treating simulation as a consequence of goal selection, the 5S model conceptualizes simulation as a precursor to goal formation. Individuals often encounter situations in which multiple futures are conceivable but no specific goal has yet been adopted. A student may imagine attending graduate school, entering the labor market, or pursuing entrepreneurial activity. A mid-career professional may envision remaining in a current position, changing employers, or establishing an independent business. In such cases, simulation does not serve an existing goal. Instead, it generates and evaluates possible futures from which goals subsequently emerge.

This distinction is important because goals are rarely self-evident. Individuals are continuously exposed to numerous potential courses of action, only a small subset of which become meaningful objects of commitment. Simulation provides the mechanism through which possible futures are transformed into candidate goals. By imagining future states, individuals can explore not only anticipated outcomes but also the identities, responsibilities, relationships, and lifestyles associated with those outcomes. This perspective is consistent with research on possible selves, which argues that imagined future identities help organize motivation and self-regulation (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2006). A future is therefore evaluated not merely in terms of expected rewards but also in terms of its broader compatibility with personal aspirations and circumstances.

Simulation also allows individuals to compare multiple futures before selecting among them. Rather than evaluating isolated options, individuals construct a repertoire of imagined trajectories. These imagined trajectories vary in desirability, feasibility, uncertainty, and personal significance. Through repeated simulation, some futures become increasingly compelling while others lose their attractiveness. Research on episodic future thinking suggests that such simulations enable individuals to mentally pre-experience alternative futures and assess their potential consequences before action is taken (Szpunar, 2010; Schacter et al., 2008). Goal formation can therefore be understood as a process of progressive differentiation among simulated futures.

A further implication is that goals are fundamentally future-oriented constructions rather than fixed preferences waiting to be revealed. Traditional decision models often assume that preferences exist prior to choice and that goals reflect these underlying preferences. The 5S model adopts a more dynamic perspective. Preferences themselves may be shaped and refined through simulation. As individuals imagine alternative futures, they discover new possibilities, revise prior expectations, and reassess what they consider desirable or attainable. Research on prospective cognition similarly suggests that future simulation plays a constructive role in decision-making by enabling individuals to evaluate hypothetical futures before they occur (Seligman et al., 2013; Schacter et al., 2017). Goal formation is therefore an emergent outcome of exploratory cognitive activity rather than a simple expression of pre-existing preferences.

The central proposition of this section can be summarized as follows: goals emerge from simulation. Individuals do not merely simulate futures in order to pursue goals; they simulate futures in order to determine which goals are worth pursuing in the first place. Simulation thus serves as the bridge between situational awareness and intentional action. It transforms salient concerns into envisioned futures and provides the cognitive foundation upon which subsequent goal selection becomes possible.

Proposition 1

Goals emerge through the simulation and evaluation of alternative future states.

3.4 Selection

Simulation generates a set of possible futures, but not all imagined futures become goals. The fourth stage of the 5S model concerns selection, the process through which individuals choose among alternative future trajectories and commit to particular courses of action.

Selection transforms imagined possibilities into actionable goals. Following simulation, individuals typically confront multiple future scenarios that differ in their anticipated outcomes, requirements, risks, and implications. A student may imagine pursuing graduate education, entering employment, or starting a business. A professional may consider remaining in a current position, seeking promotion, changing organizations, or pursuing independent work. The task of selection is to determine which of these simulated futures becomes the primary object of commitment.

Three factors are particularly important in shaping selection: desirability, feasibility, and self-consistency.

Desirability refers to the perceived attractiveness of a future state. Individuals are more likely to select futures that promise valued outcomes, such as achievement, security, autonomy, social recognition, or personal fulfillment. Desirability provides the motivational pull that makes a future worth pursuing (Higgins, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Feasibility concerns the perceived attainability of a future. Individuals may regard a future as highly desirable while simultaneously judging it to be unrealistic or unattainable. Assessments of available resources, skills, opportunities, and constraints influence whether a simulated future is viewed as achievable. Selection therefore depends not only on what individuals want but also on what they believe they can realistically accomplish. This emphasis on perceived attainability is consistent with research on self-efficacy, which highlights the importance of beliefs about one's capability to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997).

Self-consistency refers to the perceived compatibility of a future with an individual's identity, values, and self-understanding. Some futures may appear both desirable and feasible yet feel inconsistent with how individuals understand themselves or wish to live their lives. A future that conflicts with deeply held values, personal commitments, or preferred identities is less likely to become a stable goal, even when it offers substantial rewards. Research on self-concordance and possible selves similarly suggests that

goals are more likely to be adopted and sustained when they are aligned with personal identities and internalized values (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Selection can therefore be understood as a process of balancing attraction, attainability, and personal coherence. Goals emerge when a simulated future is simultaneously perceived as desirable, feasible, and sufficiently consistent with the individual's sense of self.

Importantly, selection does not necessarily produce a permanent commitment. Goals remain subject to revision as circumstances change and new information becomes available. The outcome of selection is therefore provisional rather than final. What matters is that selection converts simulated futures into concrete directions for action, thereby enabling goal pursuit to proceed.

Proposition 2

Simulated futures are more likely to become goals when they are perceived as desirable, feasible, and self-consistent.

3.5 Satisfaction

The final stage of the model concerns satisfaction, the evaluation of outcomes generated through goal-directed action. After selecting and pursuing a particular goal, individuals assess the consequences of their actions and compare realized outcomes with prior expectations.

Satisfaction is not limited to the achievement or non-achievement of goals. Individuals evaluate outcomes across multiple dimensions, including performance, emotional experience, personal growth, social consequences, and consistency with prior aspirations. A goal may be successfully achieved yet generate disappointment if the outcome fails to deliver the anticipated benefits. Conversely, individuals may experience satisfaction despite incomplete goal attainment if the process itself is perceived as meaningful or rewarding (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Because expectations are formed during simulation, satisfaction depends in part on the relationship between imagined futures and experienced realities. Individuals continuously compare actual outcomes with previously simulated scenarios. Positive evaluations reinforce commitment to existing goals and strategies, whereas negative evaluations encourage reconsideration, adjustment, or disengagement. This process resembles the feedback mechanisms emphasized in control theory and self-regulation research, where behavior is continuously adjusted in response to discrepancies between desired and actual states (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998).

The central function of satisfaction is therefore evaluative feedback. Outcomes provide information about both the desirability and viability of previously selected goals. Through evaluation, individuals learn which aspirations remain worth pursuing, which require modification, and which should be abandoned altogether.

This feedback process connects satisfaction to the beginning of a new cycle of goal pursuit. Evaluations of outcomes alter how individuals perceive their circumstances, resources, opportunities, and constraints. Successful experiences may increase confidence, expand perceived opportunities, and reshape future aspirations. Unsuccessful experiences may highlight limitations, reveal new challenges, or redirect attention toward alternative priorities. Consistent with social cognitive theory, such evaluations can influence subsequent beliefs about competence, efficacy, and future possibilities (Bandura, 1991, 1997).

Satisfaction therefore does not mark the end of the process. Rather, it generates revised situational understandings that become the starting point for subsequent cycles of salience formation, simulation, and selection. Goal pursuit is thus best understood as a recursive process in which individuals continuously interpret, imagine, choose, act, and evaluate. The outcome of one cycle becomes the situation from which the next cycle begins.

Proposition 3

Evaluations of goal outcomes reshape situational perceptions and initiate subsequent cycles of salience formation, simulation, and goal selection.

4. Goal Pursuit as a Recursive Process

The central argument of this paper is that goal pursuit is best understood as a recursive process rather than a linear sequence of commitment and action. Existing theories have generated important insights into persistence, motivation, and self-regulation, yet they often explain persistence, revision, and disengagement as separate phenomena governed by different mechanisms. The 5S model offers an alternative perspective. It treats these outcomes as alternative trajectories emerging from a common process of recursive adaptation.

From this perspective, goals are not fixed commitments that remain stable until they are either achieved or abandoned. Instead, they are continuously reproduced, modified, and reassessed through cycles of interpretation, simulation, selection, action, and evaluation. The outcome of one cycle becomes the starting point for the next. Individuals repeatedly reinterpret their situations, construct alternative futures, and evaluate the consequences of prior decisions. Goal pursuit therefore involves ongoing adaptation rather than the execution of a predetermined plan.

The recursive character of the model becomes visible through the relationship between satisfaction and situation. Evaluative feedback reshapes how individuals understand their circumstances, resources, opportunities, and constraints. These revised interpretations influence subsequent patterns of salience formation, future simulation, and goal selection. Persistence, revision, and disengagement emerge from this continuing process of feedback and adaptation. The following sections develop this argument by examining how recursive evaluation generates different trajectories of goal pursuit.

[Insert Fig. 2 about here.]

4.1 Feedback and Updating

The recursive dynamics of the 5S model originate from evaluative feedback. Following goal-directed action, individuals assess the outcomes of their efforts and compare realized experiences with prior expectations. These evaluations generate information that alters subsequent perceptions of the situation. This process is broadly consistent with self-regulation and control theories that conceptualize behavior as a continuous cycle of monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998).

Positive outcomes may reinforce confidence, increase perceived opportunities, and strengthen beliefs about personal capabilities. Negative outcomes may reveal previously unnoticed constraints, challenge existing assumptions, or expose limitations in current strategies. In both cases, evaluation changes how individuals understand themselves and their environments. Such evaluative processes play a central role in social cognitive theory, which emphasizes how experiences influence beliefs about competence and future action (Bandura, 1991, 1997).

Importantly, feedback does not merely affect ongoing effort. It also reshapes the conditions under which future goals are interpreted and evaluated. As situational perceptions change, new forms of salience emerge. Concerns that previously dominated attention may decline in importance, while previously neglected opportunities become more prominent. A successful career transition may shift attention from job security toward personal development. Conversely, repeated setbacks may redirect attention toward alternative pathways that were not previously considered.

Feedback therefore functions as the mechanism through which goal systems remain adaptive. Individuals do not simply execute pre-existing plans. They continuously update their understanding of reality and use these updated interpretations to generate new simulations and future possibilities. Through this process, goal pursuit becomes an ongoing cycle of learning rather than a fixed trajectory toward a predetermined endpoint.

The significance of feedback lies in its ability to generate multiple possible outcomes. Depending on how experiences are evaluated, recursive updating may reinforce existing commitments, encourage the exploration of alternative futures, or undermine commitment altogether. Persistence, revision, and disengagement therefore originate from the same underlying process of evaluative adaptation.

Proposition 4

Evaluative feedback updates situational perceptions and generates the conditions under which goal persistence, revision, and disengagement become possible.

4.2 Goal Persistence

The first possible outcome of recursive updating is goal persistence. Persistence occurs when repeated cycles of evaluation continue to support commitment to an existing goal despite the passage of time and the challenges encountered during pursuit.

The 5S model suggests that persistence is most likely when three conditions are present. First, individuals experience relatively high levels of satisfaction. Positive evaluations reinforce commitment by confirming that progress toward the goal remains meaningful and rewarding. Consistent with self-determination theory, goals that generate experiences of competence, autonomy, and personal fulfillment are more likely to sustain long-term engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Second, the goal continues to be perceived as feasible. Individuals must maintain the belief that the desired future remains attainable given available resources, capabilities, and opportunities. Even highly desirable goals may lose support when they are perceived as unattainable. This emphasis on feasibility parallels research on self-efficacy, which identifies beliefs about personal capability as a key determinant of persistence and sustained effort (Bandura, 1997).

Third, the goal remains consistent with the individual's values and self-concept. Goals that align with personal identity and deeply held aspirations are more likely to survive temporary setbacks and short-term disappointments. Research on self-concordant goals suggests that individuals are more persistent when their goals reflect internalized values and authentic interests rather than external pressures (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

Persistence therefore reflects more than determination or willpower. It emerges from the repeated reproduction of favorable evaluations across successive cycles of goal pursuit. Commitment is continuously regenerated because the goal repeatedly satisfies the conditions that originally supported its selection. In this sense, persistence is not simply the continuation of effort but the ongoing renewal of commitment through recursive feedback.

From the perspective of the 5S model, persistence should be understood as one possible outcome of goal dynamics rather than as the default state of goal pursuit. Goals persist because recursive evaluation continues to support them. When this support weakens, alternative trajectories become possible.

Proposition 5

Goal persistence is most likely when recursive evaluation repeatedly confirms the desirability, feasibility, and self-consistency of a selected future.

4.3 Goal Revision

The second possible outcome of recursive updating is goal revision. Whereas persistence involves the continued reproduction of an existing commitment, revision occurs when evaluative feedback generates

alternative futures that are judged to be more desirable, feasible, or self-consistent than the currently selected goal.

Goal revision occupies an intermediate position between persistence and disengagement. Individuals do not simply maintain an existing goal, nor do they abandon goal-directed activity altogether. Instead, they modify the content of their commitment while preserving orientation toward an underlying concern or aspiration. The object of commitment changes, but future-oriented action continues.

Goal revision occurs when the underlying concern remains salient but the preferred future changes. An individual initially committed to becoming a medical doctor may later redirect efforts toward biomedical research. A person pursuing entrepreneurial ambitions may shift from establishing an independent business to developing innovative projects within an existing organization. Similarly, a student aspiring to enter a particular profession may revise that aspiration after acquiring new experiences, information, or opportunities. In each case, commitment persists, but the future through which that commitment is expressed is redefined.

The 5S model explains revision as a consequence of renewed simulation. Feedback from prior experiences generates updated situational perceptions and new forms of salience. These changes encourage individuals to construct and evaluate alternative futures that may better satisfy concerns regarding desirability, feasibility, or self-consistency. Selection then occurs among these newly simulated possibilities. Revision therefore emerges not from declining motivation but from the generation of new futures that appear preferable to previously selected trajectories.

This interpretation is consistent with research on developmental regulation and adaptive goal adjustment, which suggests that individuals continually modify goals in response to changing opportunities and constraints (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Heckhausen et al., 2010). However, the 5S model places greater emphasis on the role of future simulation in generating alternative commitments. Revision is not merely a reaction to changing circumstances; it is a process through which individuals actively reconstruct possible futures.

From this perspective, revision should not be understood as evidence of inconsistency or failure. Rather, it represents an adaptive mechanism that allows goal systems to remain responsive to changing environments while preserving continuity of purpose. The continuity lies not necessarily in a specific goal but in the underlying concerns that continue to organize future-oriented action.

Importantly, revision may be one of the most common outcomes of goal pursuit. In environments characterized by uncertainty and change, individuals frequently encounter new information that challenges existing assumptions and generates alternative possibilities. Goal pursuit therefore often involves the continual reconstruction of commitments rather than simple persistence or abrupt disengagement.

Proposition 6

Goal revision occurs when recursive evaluation generates alternative simulated futures that are perceived as more desirable, feasible, or self-consistent than currently selected goals.

4.4 Goal Disengagement

The third possible outcome of recursive updating is goal disengagement. Disengagement occurs when recursive evaluation persistently undermines commitment to a previously selected future and no longer supports its continued pursuit.

Research on goal adjustment has demonstrated that disengagement can be an adaptive response when goals become unattainable or excessively costly (Wrosch et al., 2003, 2007; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Existing explanations typically emphasize declining motivation, repeated failure, or resource depletion as primary causes of disengagement. The 5S model incorporates these insights while situating disengagement within a broader process of recursive goal dynamics.

Disengagement becomes likely when repeated evaluations weaken one or more of the conditions that originally supported goal selection. A goal may cease to appear desirable because personal priorities have changed. It may cease to appear feasible because new constraints emerge or repeated setbacks reduce confidence in success. Alternatively, it may become increasingly inconsistent with an individual's values, identity, or preferred way of life.

Unlike persistence, which reproduces commitment, and revision, which redirects commitment toward alternative futures, disengagement involves the withdrawal of commitment from a previously selected trajectory. However, disengagement should not be understood as the termination of goal pursuit itself. Rather, it represents the dissolution of a particular commitment within an ongoing process of future-oriented adaptation.

From the perspective of the 5S model, disengagement emerges when recursive evaluation repeatedly fails to reproduce the conditions necessary for continued commitment. As experiences accumulate, previously selected futures may lose their attractiveness, plausibility, or personal significance. The future that once organized action gradually ceases to function as a meaningful object of commitment.

Importantly, disengagement performs a constructive function within the broader goal system. By releasing commitment to futures that are no longer desirable, feasible, or self-consistent, individuals free cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources for the exploration of alternative possibilities. In this sense, disengagement creates the conditions under which new cycles of simulation and goal formation can occur.

The significance of disengagement therefore lies not in the termination of action but in the renewal of adaptation. The end of one commitment becomes the beginning of a new cycle of situational interpretation, salience formation, and future simulation. Goal pursuit does not stop when goals are abandoned; rather, the system reorganizes around newly emerging possibilities.

Taken together, persistence, revision, and disengagement represent three alternative outcomes of the same recursive process. They differ not because distinct psychological mechanisms are involved, but because evaluative feedback generates different patterns of adaptation over time.

Proposition 7

Goal disengagement occurs when recursive evaluation persistently undermines the desirability, feasibility, or self-consistency of a selected future, leading to the withdrawal of commitment and the exploration of alternative possibilities.

5. Applications

The 5S model is intended as a general framework for understanding goal formation and goal pursuit across a wide range of domains. Although individuals pursue different types of goals throughout their lives, the underlying process through which goals emerge, are maintained, revised, or abandoned may exhibit common structural features. This section illustrates how the model can be applied to educational, career, health, and organizational goals.

5.1 Educational Goals

Educational goals provide a useful context for illustrating the dynamics of the 5S model because they often involve long time horizons, uncertainty, and repeated evaluation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Consider a student approaching graduation. The student's situation may include academic performance, financial resources, family expectations, and available opportunities. Within this situation, certain concerns become salient, such as professional development, intellectual interests, or economic security.

These concerns motivate the simulation of alternative futures. The student may imagine entering the labor market immediately, pursuing graduate education, or preparing for professional examinations. Each future differs in anticipated benefits, costs, and personal implications. Research on educational motivation similarly suggests that future expectations and subjective task values play an important role in shaping educational aspirations and choices (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Selection occurs when one of these simulated futures becomes a preferred object of commitment. The student may decide to pursue graduate study because it appears desirable, feasible, and consistent with long-term aspirations. Subsequent experiences, including academic performance, admissions outcomes, and personal satisfaction, generate evaluative feedback that influences future decisions.

Educational trajectories often illustrate the recursive nature of goal pursuit. Initial goals may be maintained, revised, or abandoned as individuals acquire new experiences and opportunities. The 5S model therefore provides a framework for understanding educational decision-making as an evolving process rather than a single choice.

5.2 Career Goals

Career development represents another domain in which goals are continuously constructed and reconstructed over time. Individuals frequently face situations characterized by changing labor markets, organizational structures, personal capabilities, and life circumstances. Within these situations, different concerns may become salient, including promotion, income growth, autonomy, work-life balance, or professional fulfillment.

These concerns stimulate the simulation of alternative career futures. An employee may imagine seeking promotion within the current organization, changing employers, pursuing an entirely new profession, or establishing an independent business. The attractiveness of these futures depends on perceived opportunities, risks, and personal aspirations.

Selection reflects the evaluation of these alternatives. A particular future becomes a career goal when it is perceived as sufficiently desirable, feasible, and compatible with the individual's identity and values. This perspective is broadly consistent with career development theories that emphasize the interaction between self-beliefs, aspirations, and opportunity structures (Lent et al., 1994; Savickas, 2005).

Career development also demonstrates the importance of goal revision. An individual who initially aspires to become a senior executive may later pursue entrepreneurship, consulting, or academic work. Such changes are not necessarily signs of inconsistency. Rather, they reflect recursive processes of feedback, simulation, and adaptation in response to changing circumstances. The 5S model thus highlights how career goals emerge through continuous interactions between personal aspirations and evolving opportunities.

5.3 Health Goals

Health-related goals provide a particularly clear illustration of the relationship between evaluation and behavioral change. Individuals often encounter situations that draw attention to health concerns, such as medical diagnoses, physical discomfort, aging, or changing lifestyles. These experiences increase the salience of issues related to well-being and long-term quality of life.

Future simulation then generates possible trajectories. Individuals may imagine the consequences of maintaining current habits, adopting healthier diets, exercising regularly, or quitting smoking. These simulations allow individuals to compare alternative futures and assess their implications. Similar processes are emphasized in health behavior theories that highlight the importance of self-regulation, planning, and future-oriented expectations (Schwarzer, 2008). Selection occurs when one of these futures becomes the basis for action. Goals such as weight reduction, smoking cessation, or regular exercise emerge as preferred pathways toward a desired future state.

Health goals frequently involve repeated cycles of evaluation. Progress may reinforce commitment, while setbacks may lead to revision or disengagement. For example, an individual who repeatedly fails to achieve a weight-loss target may abandon a specific goal while maintaining a broader commitment to health improvement through alternative strategies.

The 5S model explains such outcomes as consequences of recursive updating rather than simple failures of self-control. Health behavior is understood as an ongoing process of adaptation in which goals evolve alongside changing experiences and expectations.

5.4 Organizational Goals

Although the 5S model has been developed primarily at the individual level, its logic can also be extended to organizations. Organizations continuously interpret their environments, identify strategic priorities, imagine alternative futures, select courses of action, and evaluate outcomes. In this sense, organizational goal formation exhibits structural similarities to individual goal pursuit.

A firm's situation may include market conditions, technological capabilities, competitive pressures, and institutional constraints. Certain issues become strategically salient, such as growth opportunities, technological disruption, sustainability challenges, or international expansion.

Organizations then engage in forms of collective simulation through strategic planning, scenario analysis, forecasting, and organizational learning. These activities generate alternative visions of the future that can become organizational goals. Research on organizational learning and strategic adaptation similarly emphasizes how organizations interpret environmental signals, construct expectations about future conditions, and revise strategic objectives over time (Cyert & March, 1963; Argyris & Schön, 1997).

Selection occurs when organizational actors commit resources and attention to particular strategic directions. Subsequent evaluations of performance provide feedback that reshapes future strategic choices.

The recursive dynamics emphasized by the 5S model are particularly evident in organizational settings. Firms frequently revise strategic objectives, abandon unsuccessful initiatives, and develop new priorities in response to changing conditions. Organizational goals therefore emerge not as fixed targets but as evolving products of ongoing interpretation, simulation, and evaluation.

The applicability of the 5S model across educational, career, health, and organizational contexts suggests that the framework captures a general process underlying goal formation and goal pursuit. While the content of goals differs across domains, the underlying cycle of situation, salience, simulation, selection, and satisfaction provides a common structure through which individuals and organizations navigate uncertain futures.

6. Implications for Goal-Setting Research

The 5S model contributes to goal-setting research by shifting attention from goal attainment to goal dynamics. Existing theories have generated important insights into commitment, persistence, self-regulation, and performance. However, these phenomena are often examined separately and are frequently analyzed in relation to goals that have already been established.

The present framework proposes a broader perspective. Rather than treating goals as fixed objects of commitment, it conceptualizes them as evolving products of recursive cycles of interpretation, simulation, selection, and evaluation. From this perspective, the central challenge is not simply explaining why individuals pursue goals, but explaining why goals persist, change, and disappear over time.

Three implications are particularly important. First, research should move beyond a primary focus on goal formation and consider the broader dynamics through which goals evolve. Second, persistence, revision, and disengagement should be understood as interconnected outcomes of a common process rather than as separate phenomena. Third, goal pursuit should be conceptualized as a recursive process of adaptation rather than a linear sequence of commitment and action.

6.1 Beyond Goal Formation

Much of the existing literature implicitly treats goal formation as the critical starting point of goal-directed behavior. Whether goals are viewed as products of personal values, motivational needs, intentions, or future-oriented cognition, the central theoretical question often concerns how goals are initially established (Locke & Latham, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Oettingen, 2012).

The 5S model suggests that this emphasis on initial goal formation captures only part of the broader process. Goals do not remain fixed once selected. They are continually evaluated, reinforced, modified, and sometimes abandoned in response to experience. Consequently, understanding goal pursuit requires attention not only to how goals originate but also to how they evolve over time.

This perspective shifts the focus of inquiry from goal formation to goal dynamics. The critical question becomes not simply why a particular goal is chosen, but why some goals persist while others are revised or abandoned. Such an approach recognizes that commitment is not a one-time event but an ongoing achievement that must be continually reproduced through experience and evaluation.

The implication is that goal formation should be understood as one phase within a larger process rather than as the primary object of explanation. Theoretical attention must therefore extend beyond the origins of goals toward the mechanisms through which goals are maintained, transformed, and replaced.

6.2 A Unified Theory of Persistence, Revision, and Disengagement

A second implication concerns the relationship between persistence, revision, and disengagement. Existing research has typically examined these outcomes within separate theoretical traditions. Goal Setting Theory emphasizes persistence (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). Self-Determination Theory explains variations in commitment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The goal adjustment literature focuses on revision and disengagement (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch et al., 2003; Heckhausen et al., 2010).

Although each tradition provides valuable insights, the relationships among these outcomes remain insufficiently integrated. Persistence, revision, and disengagement are often treated as distinct phenomena requiring different explanations.

The 5S model offers an alternative perspective by conceptualizing all three outcomes as products of a common recursive process. Individuals continually interpret situations, construct future possibilities, select goals, and evaluate outcomes. Persistence occurs when recursive evaluation repeatedly supports an existing commitment. Revision occurs when newly simulated futures become more attractive than previously selected trajectories. Disengagement occurs when evaluation persistently undermines the desirability, feasibility, or self-consistency of a goal.

This framework therefore provides a unified account of goal dynamics. Rather than asking why persistence occurs in some situations and disengagement in others, the model explains both outcomes as alternative trajectories generated by the same underlying mechanism. Theoretical differences between persistence, revision, and disengagement become differences in evaluative trajectories rather than differences in fundamental psychological processes. By integrating these phenomena within a single framework, the model offers a more coherent understanding of how goals change over time and how individuals adapt to evolving circumstances.

6.3 Goal Pursuit as Recursive Adaptation

A final implication concerns the nature of goal pursuit itself. Many theories implicitly portray goal pursuit as a relatively linear sequence in which goals are established, pursued, and eventually achieved or abandoned (Locke & Latham, 2002; Gollwitzer, 1999). Such models have generated important insights into motivation and performance but provide only limited explanations of how goals evolve through ongoing experience.

The 5S model reconceptualizes goal pursuit as a recursive process of adaptation. Through repeated cycles of situational interpretation, salience formation, simulation, selection, and evaluation, individuals continuously reconstruct their relationship to future possibilities. The outcome of one cycle becomes the starting point for the next.

This perspective builds upon broader traditions in self-regulation and control theory that emphasize feedback-driven adaptation (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998), but extends these traditions by focusing on the evolution of goals themselves. Feedback does not merely regulate behavior in relation to a fixed goal; it also reshapes the goals toward which behavior is directed.

Consequently, persistence, revision, and disengagement should be understood as adaptive responses to changing circumstances rather than as isolated events. Individuals continuously negotiate the relationship between present realities and imagined futures, modifying commitments as new information becomes available.

More broadly, the model suggests that goal pursuit is not the execution of a predetermined plan but an ongoing process of future construction and reconstruction. Goals are neither fixed preferences nor static endpoints. They are dynamic commitments that emerge, evolve, and disappear through recursive cycles of evaluation and adaptation.

By placing persistence, revision, and disengagement within a unified process framework, the 5S model provides the foundations for a more dynamic theory of goal pursuit. Rather than asking only how individuals pursue goals, it seeks to explain how goals remain in motion throughout the course of human action.

7. Conclusion

Why do some goals persist while others are revised or abandoned? Although research on goal pursuit has generated substantial insights into motivation, commitment, and self-regulation, existing theories have generally focused on particular aspects of goal-directed behavior. Persistence, revision, and disengagement have often been examined within separate theoretical traditions, leaving unanswered questions concerning how these outcomes are related within a broader process of goal pursuit.

This paper has proposed the 5S model as a recursive theory of goal dynamics. The model conceptualizes goal pursuit as a cycle consisting of five interconnected stages: Situation, Salience, Simulation, Selection, and Satisfaction. Individuals interpret their circumstances, identify salient concerns, construct alternative futures through simulation, select among those possibilities, and subsequently evaluate outcomes. These evaluations reshape future perceptions and priorities, generating new cycles of simulation, selection, and action.

The central argument of the paper is that goal persistence, revision, and disengagement emerge from the same underlying process of recursive adaptation. Persistence occurs when repeated evaluations continue to support an existing commitment. Revision occurs when newly simulated futures are perceived as more desirable, feasible, or self-consistent than previously selected trajectories. Disengagement occurs when evaluative feedback persistently undermines commitment to a selected future. Rather than representing distinct psychological phenomena, these outcomes constitute alternative trajectories generated by a common process of feedback, simulation, and evaluation.

The analysis contributes to goal-setting research in three respects. First, it shifts theoretical attention from goal formation alone toward the broader dynamics through which goals evolve over time. Second, it provides a unified framework that integrates persistence, revision, and disengagement within a single process model. Third, it reconceptualizes goal pursuit as a recursive process of adaptation in which goals are continuously reproduced, modified, and abandoned in response to experience.

The framework also provides a basis for integrating previously separate strands of research on goal setting, self-determination, self-regulation, future-oriented cognition, and goal adjustment. By locating

these phenomena within a common structure, the 5S model offers a more comprehensive account of how individuals navigate uncertainty and adapt their commitments to changing circumstances.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The present paper is primarily theoretical and does not provide direct empirical tests of the proposed framework. Future research may examine the operation of recursive goal dynamics across different populations, cultural settings, and goal domains. In particular, empirical studies could investigate the conditions under which persistence, revision, and disengagement emerge, the role of simulation in generating alternative futures, and the mechanisms through which evaluative feedback reshapes subsequent cycles of goal pursuit.

More broadly, the paper suggests that goals should not be understood as fixed endpoints that simply organize behavior. Rather, they are dynamic commitments continuously reconstructed through cycles of interpretation, simulation, action, and evaluation. Individuals do not merely pursue goals; they continually revise the futures toward which they are committed. From this perspective, goal pursuit is best understood as an ongoing process of recursive adaptation through which goals remain in motion throughout the course of human life.

Declarations

Ethics declaration

This study is a theoretical and conceptual analysis and did not involve human participants, human data, personal information, interviews, surveys, experiments, or animal subjects. Ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not required in accordance with institutional and international research guidelines.

Author Contribution

The entire manuscript is written by K.K.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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Figures

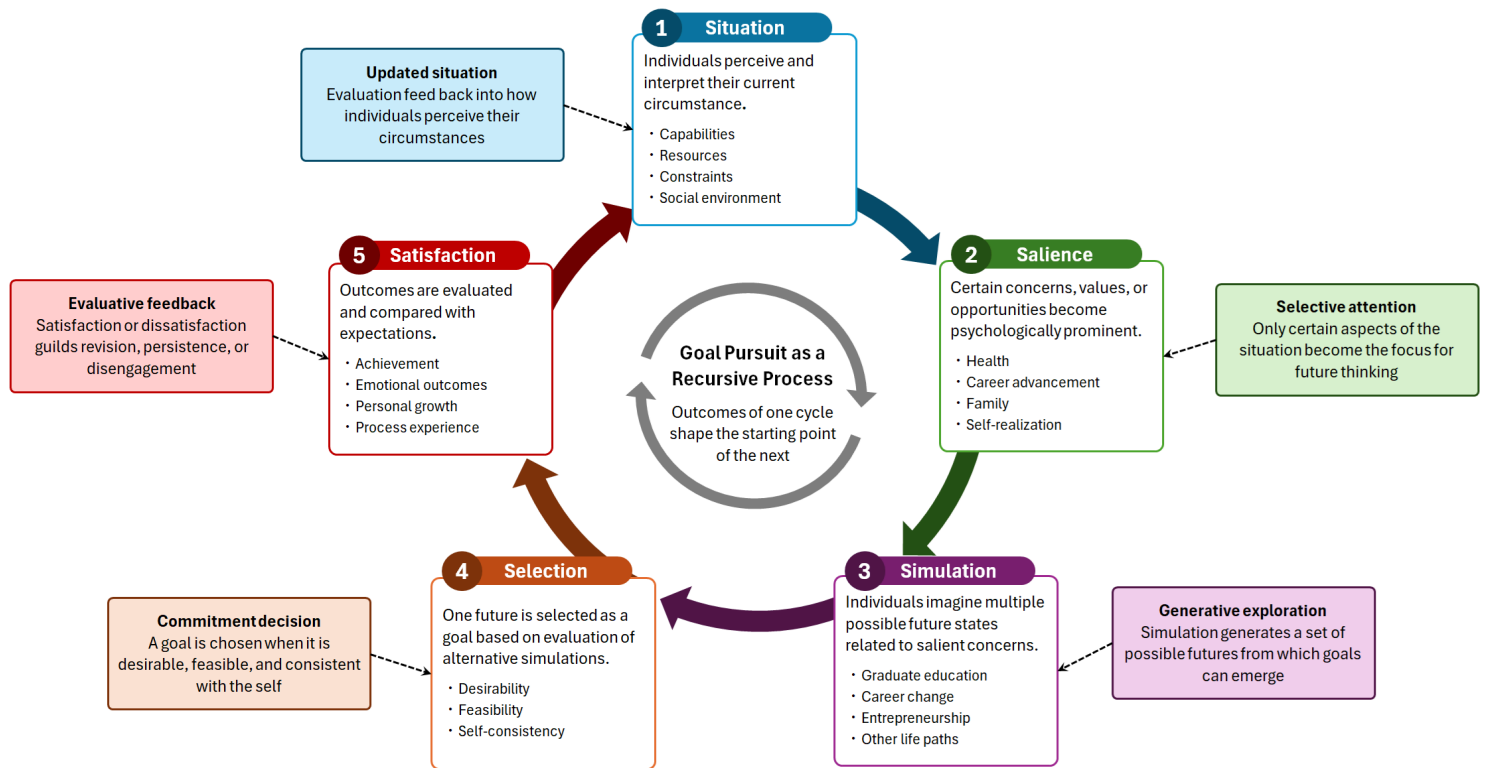


Figure 1

The 5S Cycle of Goal Pursuit

The figure illustrates the 5S model of goal pursuit as a recursive process consisting of five stages: Situation, Salience, Simulation, Selection, and Satisfaction. Individuals begin by interpreting their current circumstances (Situation), from which particular concerns, values, or opportunities become psychologically prominent (Salience). These salient concerns guide the construction of alternative future states through mental simulation (Simulation). Goals emerge when one of these imagined futures is selected on the basis of its desirability, feasibility, and consistency with the self (Selection). Outcomes are subsequently evaluated against prior expectations (Satisfaction), and these evaluations reshape how individuals perceive their circumstances, generating a new cycle of goal formation and pursuit. The model conceptualizes goals not as fixed preferences but as emergent outcomes of an ongoing process of situational interpretation, future-oriented cognition, action, and feedback.

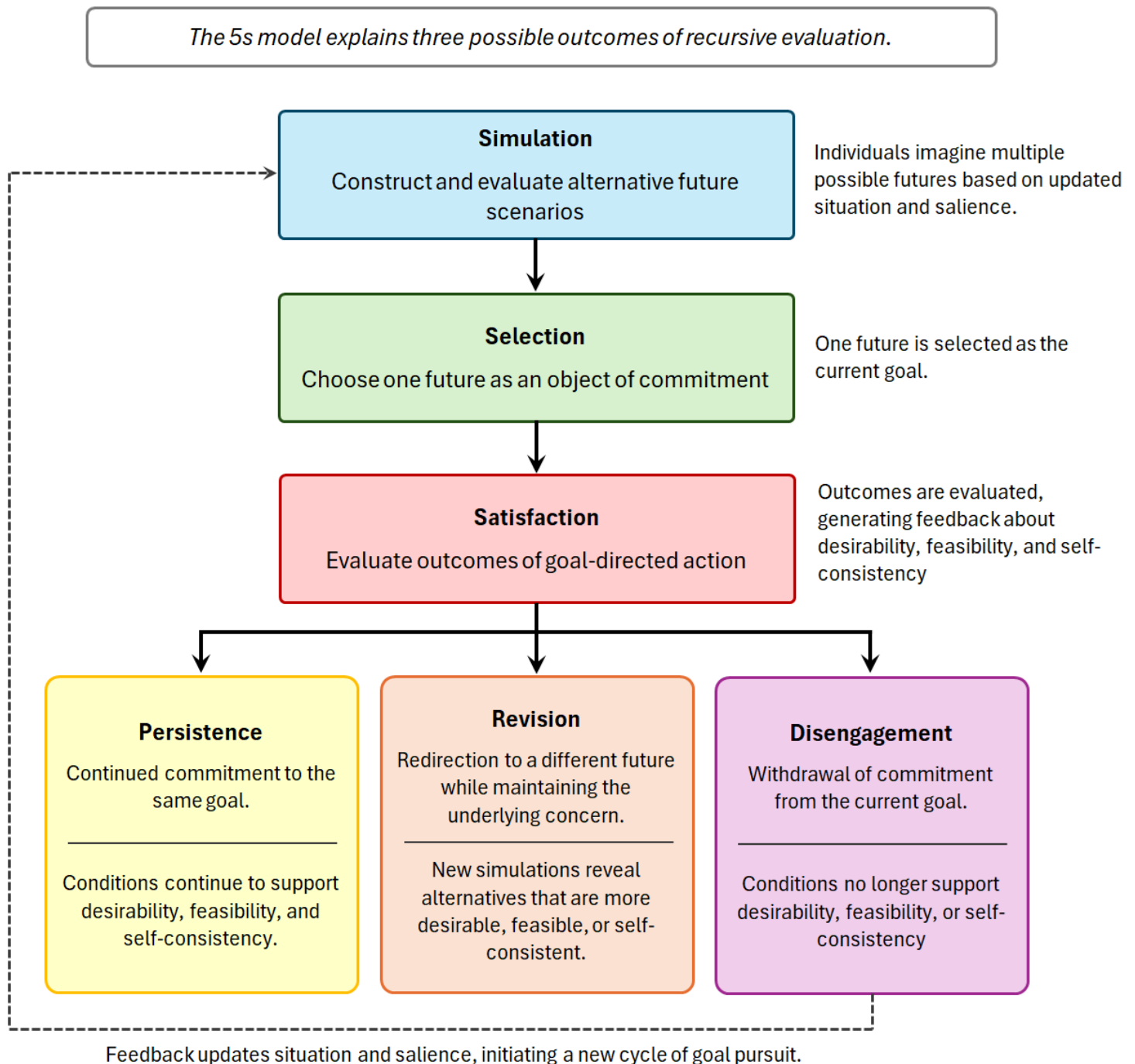


Figure 2

Recursive Dynamics of Goal Pursuit

The figure illustrates the dynamic logic of the 5S model. Following the simulation and selection of a future, individuals engage in goal-directed action and subsequently evaluate outcomes through satisfaction. Evaluative feedback updates situational perceptions and generates new cycles of salience formation, simulation, and selection. Depending on how experiences are evaluated, recursive updating may produce three alternative outcomes: goal persistence, goal revision, or goal disengagement. Persistence occurs when evaluation continues to support an existing commitment. Revision occurs

when newly simulated futures are perceived as more desirable, feasible, or self-consistent than previously selected goals. Disengagement occurs when evaluative feedback persistently undermines commitment to a selected future. The figure highlights the central argument of the paper that persistence, revision, and disengagement are not distinct processes but alternative trajectories generated by a common cycle of recursive adaptation.