



Published in final edited form as:

*Psychol Inq.* 2019 ; 30(3): 147–150. doi:10.1080/1047840x.2019.1646052.

## Takin' It to the Streets: Approach/Avoidance Motivation in the Lives of At-Risk Youth

Ann B. Brewster, Wilkie A. Wilson, Timothy J. Strauman

Duke University

An alarming number of young people are not connected productively to society in terms of education, work, and positive social supports. They are typically either not in school or do not possess a high-school degree, are not employed or affiliated with the formal labor market, lack strong connections to supportive adults and community resources, and often have been involved with the criminal justice system (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015). These young people have been designated *disconnected youth*. Although high school graduation rates and employment rates for those between ages 16 and 24 appear to be on the rise across the nation, the number of disconnected youth is still extremely high. Nationwide, approximately 6 million 16-to-24-year olds are neither engaged in formal education nor employed (Measure of America, 2018).

Unfortunately, the costs and consequences of being disconnected from society are enormous, both to individuals and to the community. It is essential for basic and applied researchers to re-examine and strengthen practices, programs, and policies within our communities that will help these youth minimize engagement in harmful behaviors and maximize their potential. In this commentary, we discuss how our respective experiences studying interventions for at-risk adolescents (Babinski et al., 2018; Blalock et al., under review; Brewster et al., 2016) highlight opportunities and challenges in the application of psychological theories of motivation to real-world settings. We view intervention and prevention research in at-risk populations as an extraordinary and yet underutilized laboratory for two-way translational studies that both validate and challenge our theories. Our question is: do the scientific principles described in the target article resonate within an applied, community-based intervention setting?

Among the social-cognitive processes documented as important influences on adaptive vs. maladaptive behavior, *self-regulation* – the ongoing process in which individuals pursue personal goals and evaluate their progress toward such goals – is critical (Strauman, 2017). Particularly for adolescents, individual differences in self-regulation may influence the development of maladaptive behavior through effects on social cognition and downstream consequences such as attention to cues for reward versus threat, choices of companions, identification with role models, resisting temptation, and delay of gratification (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). As we noted previously, these individual differences include both bottom-up (e.g., temperament-based) and top-down (derived from socialization) processes

which interact dynamically to influence goal setting and approach/avoidance behavior (Strauman & Wilson, 2010). The target article offers a systematic and thoughtful review of how multiple layers of self-regulatory mechanisms operate, and we wish simply to identify here some examples of how knowledge of those mechanisms might be used in intervention and prevention research, with a particular emphasis on providing relevant knowledge to adolescents themselves.

Regulatory focus theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997) draws upon the assumption that self-regulation operates differently when serving different needs. Promotion-oriented adolescents may prefer social situations that involve taking more risks, whereas prevention-oriented adolescents demonstrate a “conservative” orientation in the same kinds of situations (Lockwood et al., 2002). Regulatory focus operates as both a situational and dispositional influence on vulnerability to substance use and other maladaptive behaviors among adolescents. Individual differences in regulatory focus can influence decision making in complex social situations (Leone, Perugini, & Bagozzi, 2005). The promotion/prevention salience of particular social situations could increase or decrease the likelihood of engaging in a particular behavior such as trying tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana or engaging in other risky behaviors (Van Ryzin, Fosco, & Dishion, 2012). In addition, regulatory focus has been found to predict the effectiveness of anti-smoking campaigns among adults and adolescents (Kim, 2006), suggesting the potential utility of assessing individual differences in regulatory focus within preventive interventions.

For the past several years, each of us has been engaged in developing and pilot-testing preventive interventions specifically targeting adolescents at a broad range of risk for becoming disconnected. Our projects use techniques and strategies that fit squarely within the self-regulation domain, including goal-setting, metacognition, and self-efficacy. As such, we were excited to have the opportunity to share our observations about the target article in light of our ongoing experiences engaging with at-risk youth in and outside of educational contexts. Summarized below are reactions to the article based on day-to-day interactions with the at-risk adolescents we are privileged to work with. Our experience sharing this knowledge with them gives us reason for optimism and also suggests next steps for intervention development as well as theory refinement. In particular, we asked: how can increasing knowledge about the nature of approach and avoidance motivation be applied to enhance the successful adaptation of youth in general and at-risk youth in particular?

One clear possibility from the article concerned how to help adolescents balance a realistic appraisal of their challenges and vulnerabilities with the benefits of both kinds of motivation in the pursuit of long-term goals. For example, consider the article’s assertion that “When uncertain about goal commitment, focusing on distance from an undesired end-state was more motivating” (p. 12). We have observed that our students are more enthusiastic and engaged to identify and set future “approach” goals (e.g., getting a driver’s license; getting a job; graduating from high school; looking into a career or college; going to college or trade school; working on an exciting long-term goal, such as writing a novel) when they are first “primed” with and reminded about *how far they had already come in spite of their difficult circumstances and previous failures*. Their motivation and discipline for learning clearly increased when they were reminded how impressive it is they have persisted in school,

despite their situations of being remanded to a school solely for long-term suspended students (one with rules and structures, such as having to pass through metal detectors daily at the front door, that they generally did not like); and how much they already know and have expertise in, academically speaking and otherwise (e.g., taking care of infants, construction trades, cooking).

Although the target article doesn't explicitly predict this, we believe there may be an optimal sequence of steps to helping "at-risk" students set goals and pursue them. It appears that our students tended to move most effectively from a prevention/avoidance short-term goal to a promotion/approach long-term goal. For instance, one student who had ended up in her circumstances because of fighting initially was motivated to both come to school and participate in our intervention because she needed to stay out of trouble: "I need to avoid getting a charge." At the outset she wasn't receptive to, or motivated by, the strategies being taught to identify and pursue longer-range positive outcomes. Over time, however, it became clear that the avoidance motivation served the purpose of engaging her (over her initial reluctance) in the intervention, where she could then be drawn slowly and gently into a more balanced approach to self-regulation that acknowledged failures but also highlighted accomplishments and opportunities. We hypothesize that this pattern characterizes how many at-risk youth react to educational and disciplinary interventions and we see it as an occasion to apply theories of motivation at the micro-intervention level. Not surprisingly, this process was observed to take time; our intervention was daily for 45 minutes a day, for six weeks and we realized the need to reinforce approach goals via regular reflection. But then again, why would we expect that a brief intervention could lead to fundamental changes in motivation and goal pursuit when such patterns originally emerged over a period of years?

A second theme that has emerged from our intervention work in light of the article is the value of *making relevant motivational principles and processes explicit and salient for at-risk youth*. From both educational and ethical perspectives, we believe strongly that "pulling back the curtain" on the scientific rationale that provides the basis for a curriculum or intervention can be helpful for students in general and specifically for those at-risk of adverse outcomes. In addition to communicating respect for them as individuals, making explicit what the goals of the intervention are and "how thinking and planning can work" engages metacognitive processes which, in turn, can enhance day-to-day self-regulation outside the classroom. Teaching them about how they make decisions can be highly important for their ability to make "better" decisions in the future (e.g., pursuing legal means of earning income). Using metacognitive strategies, reflection, and planning ahead of time are all helpful for goal-setting and achievement that meets individual and societal needs (e.g., adaptive behavior that connects at-risk youth to community and societal resources). The target article wasn't organized to address this point, but we believe that the conceptual framework the authors proposed for integrating knowledge of approach and avoidance motivation is an excellent candidate for "giving psychology away" to people who are especially likely to benefit from that knowledge.

One of the most eye-opening experiences for us as intervention researchers has been how consistently the youth with whom we interact exceed popular expectations regarding their capabilities. It quickly became clear in this pilot project that our at-risk students, despite

their behavioral difficulties, were fully able to discuss, justify, reflect, process, plan, and execute goals *when they are provided the requisite knowledge, strategies, and techniques in accessible formats*. Of course, many such students are struggling academically. However, in almost every case we have seen that adolescents – even those with substantial histories of academic and/or behavioral difficulties – can be eager learners within a supportive context, that they easily grasp the motivational and metacognitive principles we want them to know about, and that they quickly develop the ability to analyze situations, identify potential problems, and choose appropriate goals and strategies. Even the simple provision of a 3 × 5 index card for students to create their own diagram of a desired goal, key action steps and resources needed to reach the goal, and identification of potential obstacles and their means of overcoming the obstacles, provided a strong visual reminder about accurate self-appraisal and productive goal setting that was enough to make a difference. As such, we hypothesize that once adolescents are comfortable in a learning context (regardless of what avoidance motivation may have brought them there), teaching about goal setting fits well within an approach/promotion framework that helps to generate the motivation they need to try, fail, reflect, revise, and try again.

Third, we were particularly drawn to the target article's insights about how people interpret failure and how our increasing knowledge of approach vs. avoidance motivation can set the stage for responding optimally to failure experiences. In our intervention work with at-risk youth, we emphasize *putting failure in perspective*. Our commitment to respecting them as individuals included telling them that failure happens and is part of the road to successful outcomes and goals – not sugar-coating their mistakes but also not minimizing life's obstacles or downplaying the incredibly challenging circumstances in which many adolescents find themselves. As one exercise, we engaged a group of students in an informal discussion of the highs and lows of seeking employment (since most of the at-risk youth with whom we interact come from families under economic stress). Invariably, one student in the group would look back on her own experiences and observe how looking for a job involved many rejections on the way to eventually getting one. While all of us need to learn this kind of lesson, it can be especially difficult for at-risk adolescents (who already have experienced significant hardships) to persist until they find what they are looking for. The multi-level/multi-system perspective of the target article was especially relevant to this topic.

In this context, the article's detailed discussion of the remarkably distinct emotional dynamics of approach vs. avoidance motivation offers much for the interventionist to explore. Our students were willing to recognize and acknowledge that the models of approach and avoidance motivation we described, and the goal pursuit strategies derived from those principles, were applicable to the circumstances of their lives. We worked with them to help them develop goals and plans that included recognizing and anticipating potential failures and we helped them discuss and plan for how to address the potential obstacles. As the target article makes clear, understanding why failure generates specific emotional states not only validates basic theories of motivation, but also allows individuals to learn about their own (often implicit) goals and standards and their default motivational styles. And as we noted above, at-risk youth are clearly capable of such a level of understanding and metacognition.

Fourth, our experience with community-based and school-based intervention research has highlighted *the essential role of relationship building as a necessary precondition for insight and behavior change*. While there is an extensive literature on the critical nature of working relationships in psychotherapy (Norcross & Wampold, 2011), we are aware of little research in personality or social psychology that focuses directly on how relationships can facilitate learning about motivation and self-regulation. The role of the interventionist in developing a genuinely caring, authentic, and affirming relationship with our students was paramount to helping them develop the self-discipline and confidence to set goals and to reflect on the process. We and other interventionists frequently underestimate both the importance of this relationship-building for the self-regulatory outcomes we are targeting and the amount of time that the relationship-building process takes. Nonetheless, whenever the interventionist had to choose between relationship-building and the learning goals for that particular session, we observed better proximal outcomes when the relationship was the priority. One potential avenue for research consistent with this observation might be to explore how the *authenticity* of the caretaker/child interactions from which individual differences in regulatory focus emerge, independent from the actual reinforcement contingencies, inhibits or facilitates such learning. We hypothesize that relationship quality will be especially helpful in obtaining the best outcomes within preventive interventions, even in contexts where the intervention format (e.g., class) sets limits on the extent to which such relationships can develop. We further hypothesize that there is substantial uncaptured variance in how individual differences in motivational orientations develop that can be predicted from examining the quality of formative caretaker/child relationships, within the overall framework that the target article provides.

Fifth, we believe it is important to reiterate the target article's implicit emphasis on *people as active, self-determining, and capable of shaping their own reward structures*. Paradoxically, whereas schools and other institutions often operate primarily on the basis of extrinsic motivating factors, our experience with at-risk students clearly indicates that they prefer to build their lives on the basis of their own goals and preferences. Equally paradoxically, while troubled youth are often treated as though they are incapable of setting and maintaining approach-oriented goals, we believe that many are in part reacting to a perceived incompatibility between what school systems value and what they themselves value. Of course, this is a well-known developmental process at the core of adolescence, and schools as institutions have limited flexibility to account for a broad range of motivational preferences. Nonetheless, we found nothing in the target article that was not as applicable to our at-risk students as it would be to the undergraduates who make up the overwhelming majority of research samples in social and personality psychology. We believe that adolescents generally want to be intrinsically motivated, even if they have yet to attain an adult level of self-regulatory competence. Thus, the token economy and reward programs that many schools use to shape behavior may not be optimal for helping at-risk students to develop abilities to make decisions and set goals. As an example, several of the students in our current study noted that while they enjoyed when the interventionist brought food to share during particular sessions, that was not the reason why they continued to participate in the intervention. Likewise, several other students commented that whereas the monetary incentives that their home schools offered to help motivate at-risk students to attend

regularly were appealing at first, they were not sufficient to overcome the boredom and lack of connection that such students often experience at school. How many adolescents at risk, if asked, would say that they love learning but they hate school?

In closing, these observations lead us to be optimistic about the directions, and real-life relevance, of current motivation research. While the synergy between theory and the lives of our students is certainly not perfect, both we and they recognize the relevance of emerging knowledge regarding approach and avoidance motivation. In the spirit of translational research as a bidirectional enterprise, we offer a few suggestions regarding how the experience accumulated across intervention research for at-risk youth can be used to refine basic motivational theory. These suggestions include: (a) taking a more explicit “strengths-based” and protective-factor perspective on the development of optimal self-regulation (e.g., Swadener & Lubeck, 1995); (b) the need, when working with high-risk youth, to balance accurate feedback regarding the risks inherent in their maladaptive behaviors with a proactive and affirming approach to teaching more adaptive goal-setting and self-regulatory skills; (c) more explicit incorporation of classic developmental models that emphasize context, social-cognitive development, and peer influence (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Elder, 1998); and (d) consideration of contextual and cultural differences in goal-setting, both in terms of locally normative approach/avoidance goal content and in the dynamic balance between approach and avoidance (Fisher et al., 2017).

Ultimately, there are many intriguing implications of the article’s thesis and principles for further research, as well as for practices and policies related to working with youth at-risk of adverse outcomes. This target article is an ideal example of how important it is to integrate strong basic research findings with intervention research and vice versa. We are convinced that there are many opportunities for successful interventions with youth at-risk, and the target article suggests that such interventions may appear counterintuitive but in actuality represent thoughtful application of motivation theory. These adolescents are not “lost souls” who are unable to be reformed at the late stage of high school; rather, with judicious and creative application of motivational principles they are likely to benefit substantially. More research needs to be conducted to examine these nuanced principles with specific populations (high risk youth) and within specific “real world” contexts (e.g., schools and juvenile justice settings). Ultimately, this integrative translational approach will be fruitful because it can improve intervention processes and outcomes at the individual level as well as the system (e.g., school or community) level.

## Acknowledgements

Our work has been supported by NIH grants DA031579, DA022569, MH039429, and DA023026, as well as funding from Bass Connections, the Social Science Research Institute, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Research at Duke University.

## References

- Babinski LM, Murray DW, Wilson WA, Kuhn CM, & Malone PS (2018). Impact of a neuroscience-based health education course on high school students’ health knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 63*, 489–496. [PubMed: 30286902]



- Blalock DV, Franzese AT, Machell KA, & Strauman TJ Regulatory focus and substance use in adolescents: Protective effects of prevention orientation. Under review, *Journal of Research in Adolescence*.
- Brewster AB, Pisani P, Ramsayer M, & Wise J (2016). Building a university-community partnership to promote high school graduation and beyond: An innovative undergraduate team approach. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 8, 44–58.
- Bronfenbrenner U (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Eccles JS, & Wigfield A (2002). “Motivational beliefs, values, and goals”. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 109–132.
- Elder GH Jr. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69, 1–12. [PubMed: 9499552]
- Fisher O, O'Donnell SC, & Oyserman D (2017). Social class and identity-based motivation. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 61–66. [PubMed: 28826006]
- Higgins ET (1997). Beyond pleasure and pain. *American Psychologist*, 52, 1280–1300. [PubMed: 9414606]
- Kim Y-J (2006). The role of regulatory focus in message framing in antismoking advertisements for adolescents. *Journal of Advertising*, 35, 143–151.
- Leone L, Perugini M, & Bagozzi RP (2005). Emotions and decision making: Regulatory focus moderates the influence of anticipated emotions on action evaluations. *Cognition and Emotion*, 19, 1175–1198.
- Lewis K, & Burd-Sharps S (2015). Zeroing in on place and race. Youth disconnection in America's cities. Social Science Research Council, Measure of America Project.
- Lockwood P, Jordan CH, & Kunda Z (2002). Motivation by positive or negative role models: Regulatory focus determines who will best inspire us. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 854–864. [PubMed: 12374440]
- Norcross JC, & Wampold BE (2011). Evidence-based therapy relationships: Research conclusions and clinical practices. *Psychotherapy*, 48, 98–102. [PubMed: 21401280]
- Strauman TJ (2017). Self-regulation and psychopathology: Toward an integrative translational research paradigm. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 13, 497–523.
- Strauman TJ, & Wilson WA (2010). Individual differences in approach and avoidance: Behavioral activation/inhibition and regulatory focus as distinct systems In Hoyle R (Ed.), *Handbook of self-regulation and personality* (pp. 447–473). New York: Guilford Press.
- Swadener BB, & Lubeck S (Eds.). (1995). *Children and families “at promise”*: Deconstructing the discourse of risk. New York: SUNY Press.
- Van Ryzin MJ, Fosco GM, & Dishion TJ (2012). Family and peer predictors of substance use from early adolescence to early adulthood: An 11-year prospective analysis. *Addictive Behaviors*, 37(12), 1314–1324. [PubMed: 22958864]