

# Rite of Passage Gone Wrong: The Effects of Achieving Versus Failing to Reach a Dream School Goal

Anne Holding, Marina Milyavskaya, Nora Hope & Richard Koestner, McGill University

## ABSTRACT

- This prospective study examined how first-year students' SWB and developmental progress were impacted by the achievement vs. failure of a "dream school" goal across two semesters.
- Specifically, we were interested in the "Defeated Dreamers" group, and whether their levels of autonomous motivation for attending an alternate school facilitated the disengagement from their initial dream school goal.

## BACKGROUND

- Self Determination researchers have extensively shown that greater autonomous motivation for *pursuing* certain goals is associated with greater well-being and psychological wellness (e.g. Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004)
- However, little is known about whether autonomous motivation is predictive of these outcomes when the motivation is geared at *disengaging* from a certain goal.
- Research suggests that disengagement from unattainable goals can benefit individuals' subjective well-being, mental and physical health. (see Heckhausen, Wrosch & Schultz, 2010)
- While the *Motivational Theory of Life-Span Development* has established *how* successful goal disengagement takes place, it remains unclear *why* certain individuals manage to disengage from elapsed goals, while others fruitlessly persist.
- This study considered the role of **autonomous motivation in successful goal disengagement.**

## METHODS

### Longitudinal Procedure

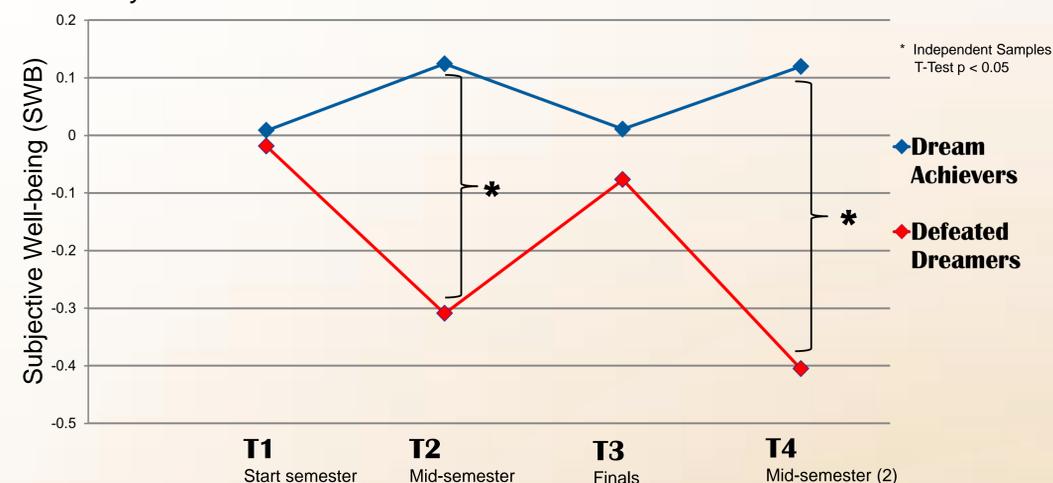
- N=159 first year undergraduate students, (109 = "Dream Achievers"; 50= "Defeated Dreamers"), completed 4 surveys across the academic year

### Measures

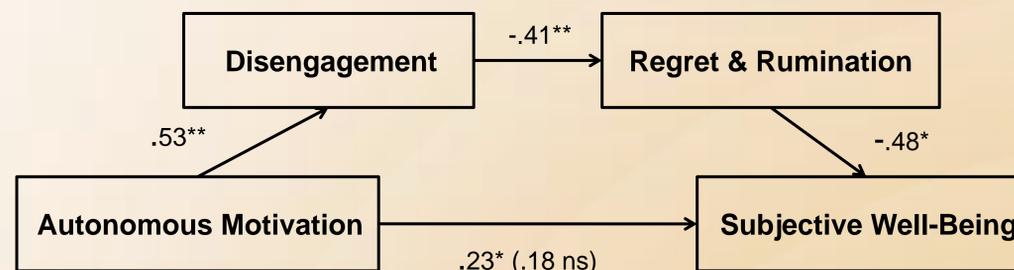
- **Questions measuring "Dream School Status"**
- **Motivation Measures** (adapt. Sheldon & Kasser, 1995)
- **Positive Affect (PA) & Negative Affect (NA)** (Diener and Emmon, 1984)
- **The Satisfaction with Life Scale** (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985)
- **Disengagement Scale** (adapt. Wrosch et al. 2003)
- **Regret & Rumination** (adapt. Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991)
- **Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory** (Rosenthal, Gurney & More, 1981)

## RESULTS

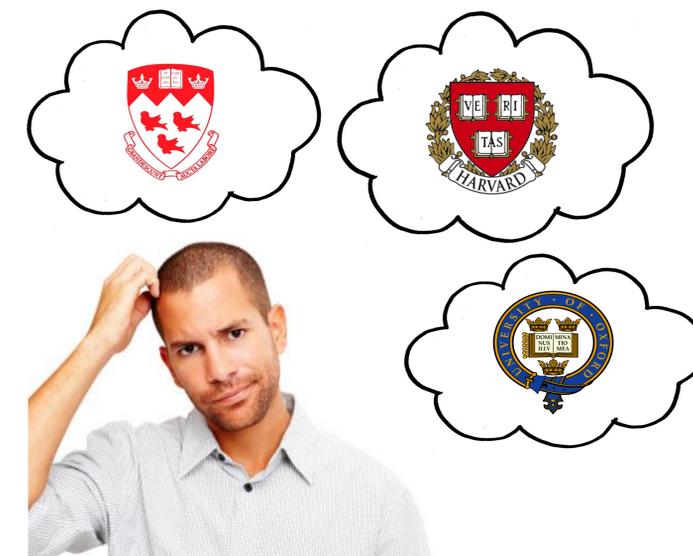
**Fig. 1 Graph** describing Dream Achievers' and Defeated Dreamers' change in SWB across the academic year



**Fig. 2 Serial Mediation Model** describing relationship between autonomous motivation for attending university, levels of disengagement from initial dream school, total levels of regret and rumination and SWB at T2 for Defeated Dreamers



- Although there was no difference between the "Dream Achievers" and the "Defeated Dreamers" in SWB at the start of the semester (T1), the "Defeated Dreamers" reported significantly lower SWB as the academic year progressed (T2, T4).
- Similarly, the "Defeated Dreamers" made less progress in their Eriksonian intimacy and identity stage resolutions at T4 when controlling for T1 ( $\beta = .37, p < .05$ ;  $\beta = .31, p < .06$ ).
- While "Dream Achievers" reported higher levels of autonomous motivation for attending McGill ( $t = -4.13, p < .01$ ), **high autonomous motivation in the "Defeated Dreamer" group appeared to mitigate the negative consequences of dream school failure:**
- A serial mediation model suggested that for the "Defeated Dreamers", **autonomous motivation facilitated the successful disengagement from their previous dream school goal.** In turn, this was associated with **lower regret and rumination reports, which were related to higher levels of SWB at T2.**



## CONCLUSIONS

- Positive adjustment and developmental-progress outcomes were associated with realizing a dream school goal.
- However, in the case of dream school failure, high autonomous motivation for attending alternative school appeared to mitigate the negative consequences associated with a crushed dream goal.
- The mediation suggests **that autonomous motivation may play a role in facilitating individuals' successful disengagement from personally relevant, time-framed goals.**
- Future studies will:
  - (a) aim to elucidate the relationship between autonomous motivation and disengagement through experimental design
  - (b) Investigate whether autonomous motivation is related to the successful disengagement of other types of goals.
- Finally, future research in this domain could be used to create autonomy enhancing workshops for individuals hoping to disengage from elapsed/unattainable goals.