Unattainable Educational Goals: Disengagement, Reengagement to Alternative Goals, and Consequences for Subjective Well-Being[1]

-

Quand les Buts de Formation Deviennent Inatteignables : Désengagement, Réengagement envers d'Autres Buts et Conséquences en termes de Bien-être

Gentiane Boudrenghien
Mariane Frenay
Université catholique de Louvain

Etienne Bourgeois
Université de Genève

[1] The present chapter is a slightly modified version of a paper entitled "Unattainable educational goals: Disengagement, reengagement to alternative goals, and consequences for subjective well-being" from Boudrenghien, Frenay and Bourgeois. This paper is submit for publication. The modifications only concern the form.

Traditionally, it has been thought that giving up personal goals is an undesirable response to difficulties. However, is it always positive in terms of well-being to be highly committed to one's goals? This study raises this question in the context of educational goals which come to be seen as unattainable. In this context, we investigated the consequences of goal commitment, goal disengagement, and goal reengagement on several dimensions of subjective well-being. Some 357 students who had obtained secondary-school leaving qualifications enabling them to enter university took part in the first wave of data collection; 186 of them participated in the second wave. The results show that the positive impact of goal commitment on well-being disappears, or even becomes negative, when the goal is perceived as unattainable. Moreover, disengagement from a perceived unattainable goal was found to have beneficial effects on self-mastery and satisfaction with life. However, this disengagement is not enough to reduce depression; it has to be combined with reengagement with an alternative goal. Those results are discussed and suggestions for future research and for counselling are formulated.

Goal commitment; goal disengagement; goal reengagement; subjective well-being; higher education

Traditionnellement, l'abandon de ses projets est considéré comme une réponse non souhaitable face aux difficultés. Etre fortement engagé envers ses buts est-il pour autant toujours positif ? Notre étude soulève cette question dans le contexte de la première année dans l'enseignement supérieur et de la confrontation qu'y vivent certains étudiants avec des buts de formation qu'ils perçoivent comme devenant inatteignables. Dans ce contexte, nous analysons les conséquences de l'engagement, du désengagement et du réengagement sur plusieurs dimensions du bien-être. 357 étudiants ayant obtenu le diplôme de l'enseignement secondaire ont participé à une première phase de récolte de données. 186 d'entre eux ont pris part à une seconde phase. Les résultats soutiennent que l'impact positif de l'engagement envers un but sur le bien-être disparaît, voire devient négatif, quand le but en question est perçu comme inatteignable. Par ailleurs, le désengagement d'un but perçu comme inatteignable a des effets positifs en termes de sentiment de contrôle et de satisfaction par rapport à la vie. Cependant, ce désengagement n'est pas suffisant pour réduire la dépression. Pour ce faire, il doit être combiné à un réengagement envers un but alternatif. Nous terminons par une discussion des résultats et proposons des pistes de travail.

Engagement envers un but ; désengagement d'un but ; réengagement envers un but ; bien-être subjectif ; enseignement supérieur

Introduction

The transition from secondary school to university is a key point in students' educational trajectories, as it requires them to make important career choices. Increasingly, advisers try to develop interventions to guide students in the construction of their educational goals. Most of these interventions are aimed at helping students define an educational goal for themselves, and increasing their commitment to this goal. This work is influenced by the generally acknowledged positive role of goal commitment. The positive consequences of being highly committed to an educational goal have been extensively demonstrated empirically (e.g., Boudrenghien, Frenay, & Bourgeois, 2011; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007). But high commitment can also have negative consequences (Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000), particularly when students have goals that they perceive as unattainable. However, this negative side to high goal commitment has rarely been investigated.

A notable exception is the work of some researchers (e.g., Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003a) who have begun to show the benefits of two processes in the self-regulation of perceived unattainable goals. These are goal disengagement and goal reengagement. However, these processes have generally been studied as personal tendencies. There is still a need for research on the self-regulation of a specific type of unattainable goals, namely educational goals. During their first year at college, a considerable number of students will feel that their initial educational goal is unattainable. The present study aimed to investigate the consequences of high commitment to an educational goal for students' subjective well-being when this goal is perceived as unattainable. The processes of disengagement from the unattainable educational goal and reengagement to another goal are also analysed for their impact on subjective well-being.

The Consequences of Goal Commitment

Goal commitment—the extent to which a particular goal is associated with a strong sense of determination and with the willingness to invest effort in attaining it—and its consequences have been investigated in several empirical studies (see Pomerantz et al. [2000] for a review). These studies have identified numerous positive consequences of a strong commitment to a goal. Among others, they have shown that when people are very committed to their goals, they are

more likely to be successful at achieving them (Webb & Sheeran, 2005) and more likely to persist in their pursuit (e.g., Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998). Moreover, goal commitment has positive effects on subjective well-being. People who are very committed to their goals see their lives as exceptionally meaningful (McGregor & Little, 1998; Wrosch et al., 2003a) and experience a good deal of positive emotion (feeling proud, happy, and joyful) (e.g., Emmons, 1986). Pomerantz et al. (2000) showed that perceptions of accomplishment can account for the relationship between goal investment and positive emotions. These emotions in turn give rise to few depressive symptoms. Moreover, purpose in life has been shown to be related to feelings of control (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The more specific consequences of a high commitment to an educational goal were investigated by Germeijs and Verschueren (2007). An educational goal is defined as the goal the student is pursuing in choosing his or her study programme. Their results suggest that, within the career decision-making process, commitment to the goal is the most important predictor of choice satisfaction, choice stability, and adjustment in the chosen option, and is therefore an indirect predictor of performance. Moreover, Boudrenghien et al. (2011) showed the positive impact of educational goal commitment on persistence intention at college, which is one of the main predictors of academic achievement and persistence (Neuville et al., 2007; Tinto, 1997). However, to our knowledge, the consequences of a high commitment to an educational goal on students' well-being were not investigated.

All these results support the general impression that strong commitment to personal goals is important, and therefore giving up a goal is an undesirable response to difficulty (Wrosch et al., 2003a). However, some authors have begun to show that strong commitment to a goal can also increase psychological distress (e.g., worrying, stress), and therefore have a negative impact on physical health. More specifically, Pomerantz et al.'s (2000) study showed that a high level of goal investment increases psychological distress, because failure would be upsetting. Moreover, a continuing commitment to unfeasible goals may result in the individual being caught in barren life paths (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). This experience of slow progress toward goal attainment or even failure may have a negative impact on subjective well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1990).

Unattainable Educational Goals

People who perceive themselves as unable to attain a specific goal whatever their efforts are likely to perceive this goal as unattainable (Wrosch et al., 2003a). During the first year at university, a certain proportion of students will perceive their educational goal as much more difficult to attain than what they had imagined when they chose their study program. Among them, some students will even progressively perceive their educational goal as becoming out of reach. There can be various reasons for the educational goals to be perceived as unattainable[1]. Some students have focused, sometimes since an early age, on a vocational dream, but have not thought about the educational requirements of this dream; they are pursuing a goal which does not match their competences (Miller & Brickman, 2004). Moreover, the transition from secondary school to university involves a lot of changes: the picture students had of the academic requirements at the end of secondary school may be quite different from the actual demands made of them at university (Tinto, 1997). In this new setting, even if students thought about the requirements of their educational goal when they chose it, unexpected failure in academic tasks occurs quite frequently (Wrosch et al., 2003a), which can give rise to perceived goal unattainability. Moreover, the attainable or unattainable character of the goals is particularly evident in the educational system due to the frequent and clear positive or negative feed-back given to students on their progress. It is therefore particularly interesting to investigate the self-regulation of perceived unattainable goals in this educational context.

When facing problems in the pursuit of a goal, people can react in two different ways: either they tenaciously continue to be committed to their goal even in the face of obstacles, and try to modify the situation to accord with the goal (assimilative tendency); or they disengage from the goal, and adjust their aims to the constraints of the situation (accommodative tendency) (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). Based on the expectancy-value model (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), people who doubt their ability to attain their goal should be more likely to abandon it. However, not everyone gives up his goal equally easily. This task is

[1] The terms “attainable” and “unattainable” are too dichotomous to qualify the students’ perception of their ability to attain their educational goal. We consider that goal attainability is a continuous variable going from a perception of the goal as totally unattainable to a perception of the goal as totally attainable through perceptions of the goal as not very attainable, moderately attainable and quite attainable. However, in the present paper, the terms “attainable” and “unattainable” will be used to designate this continuous variable, mainly because it’s how it is referred in the literature (e.g., Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003b).

relatively difficult and people who have a strong sense of personal control and efficacy may be less ready to adjust their goal to the situation (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & Brun de Pontet, 2007). Moreover, not all goals are equally easy to disengage from. Disengagement is likely to be difficult from goals which occupy a central place in the hierarchical goal structure (Boudrenghien et al., 2011; Carver & Scheier, 1998).

Being aware of one's inability to attain a goal to which one is strongly committed has been shown to be likely to give rise to depression. Brandtstädter and Rothermund (2002) suggested that the disengagement from the barren goal, and the building up of a new personal goal, could put an end to this depressive phase. Brandtstädter and Renner (1990) therefore suggested a new explanation for the occurrence of depressive symptoms: "The onset, duration, and severity of depressive episodes depend not only on the degree of perceived control over personally important developmental domains (as postulated by learned helplessness theories) but as well on the ability or willingness to disengage from unfeasible goals and to build up new commitments and developmental perspectives" (pp. 64-65). However, given that accommodative processes often have negative connotations, as a synonym for resignation, these processes were neglected for a long time by research on motivation (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). The empirical studies conducted by Wrosch and his colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003a; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003b) on goal disengagement are a notable exception. These studies are based on the very similar assumption that "in situations in which people are confronted with unattainable goals, benefits accrue from the capacities to abandon goal-directed activities and to reengage in valued alternative goals" (Wrosch et al., 2003b, pp. 1494-1495). Goal disengagement and goal reengagement are the two adaptive self-regulation processes in which people who are faced with a goal which they perceive to be unattainable can engage. They are discussed below.

Goal Disengagement

Goal disengagement is defined as the ease with which people reported being able to reduce effort and relinquish commitment toward goals which they perceived as unattainable (Wrosch et al., 2003b). When the obstacles are seen as too great to overcome, Wrosch et al. (2003a) argue that giving up goal commitment allows the individual to stop trying to attain something that appears to be impossible, prevents repeated failure, and therefore preserves

subjective well-being by avoiding the potential distress associated with commitment to an unattainable goal. The capacity to relinquish unattainable goals should be a process as central to adaptive self-regulation as goal pursuit (O'Connor, Fraser, Whyte, MacHale, & Masterton, 2009). Focusing on specific goals (e.g., becoming a mother, developing an intimate relationship), several studies have provided support for this idea, and even shown an association between disengagement from perceived unattainable goals and high levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999).

Wrosch et al. (2003b) completed this approach of specific goals by investigating goal disengagement as a more general characteristic of individuals. They differentiated among people who found it relatively easy to disengage from their goals, and people for whom this disengagement was much more difficult. Studies conducted by Wrosch et al. (2003b) showed that people's general tendencies to disengage from unattainable goals are associated with subjective well-being (e.g., high levels of self-mastery, low levels of depressive symptoms). Other studies showed that physical health is positively influenced by adaptive goal disengagement and confirmed that this impact is mediated by changes in subjective well-being (Wrosch et al., 2007). It should be noted that the disengagement studied by Wrosch and his colleagues was an envisaged or projected disengagement; further research could interestingly complete this work by investigating the consequences of actual disengagement.

Reengagement with Alternative Goals

If individuals have disengaged from a previously held goal, they will then be faced with two possibilities: either they will adopt a new goal, or they won't. Various ways of reengaging with an alternative goal were proposed by Wrosch et al. (2003a). These could be for example to scale back to a more limited goal in the same domain (e.g., a student who has disengaged from the goal of becoming a surgeon and who reengages to the goal of becoming a nurse) or to form a new goal in another domain (e.g., a student who has disengaged from the goal of becoming a teacher and who reengages to the goal of becoming a lawyer, having discovered that he/she prefers or feels more able to protect children than to have a continuous role on their education).

Wrosch et al. (2003b) were among the first to investigate reengagement in a valued alternative goal as part of the self-regulation of perceived unattainable goals. Goal reengagement

is defined as the extent to which people can identify and commit to alternative goals when they are confronted with perceived unattainable goals (Wrosch et al., 2003a). Wrosch et al. (2003a) suggested that goal disengagement is "an adaptive response when it leads to the taking up of other goals" (p. 7). More specifically, Wrosch et al. (2003b) hypothesised that goal reengagement enhances subjective well-being because it is likely to change the person's focus on the failure associated with the initial goal into a focus on the positive aspects associated with the new goal. Wrosch et al. (2003b) showed that young adults' general tendencies to reengage in an alternative goal when they realised that their original goal was unattainable were associated with high levels of self-mastery and purpose in life, and low levels of perceived stress and intrusive thoughts, independent of the effect of goal disengagement.

In addition to these main effects of disengagement and reengagement on subjective well-being, Wrosch et al. (2003b) also showed an interaction effect between both predictors in predicting self-mastery, perceived stress, and affect balance. The positive effect of goal reengagement on subjective well-being was particularly marked if the young adult had difficulty disengaging from unattainable goals. Reengagement seems to be less necessary for young adults who can disengage from the perceived unattainable goal. A similar interaction effect was observed by Wrosch et al. (2007), who showed that goal reengagement tendencies were only (positively) related to subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction) and physical health among young adults who had poor disengagement capacities.

However, this interaction effect varies depending on the population being studied. Among older adults, goal disengagement needs to be accompanied by reengagement to alternative meaningful goals in order to positively influence well-being (Wrosch et al., 2003b). For older adults who have difficulty defining alternative goals, it might be better to stay committed to their initial unattainable goal, than not to be committed to any goal. However, for young adults, disengagement from the unattainable goal seems to be sufficient to positively influence well-being, even if it is not immediately accompanied by reengagement with a new goal. Wrosch et al. (2003b) suggest that the potential distress due to having disengaged from an unattainable goal without finding a new goal to pursue is probably reduced, among young adults, by their characteristically positive expectations about their futures. They are optimistic about their ability to commit to another goal later. A similar interaction effect to that shown by Wrosch et al. among

older adults was observed by O'Connor et al. (2009). They studied another population, namely a clinical sample of patients hospitalised after a suicide attempt. The suicidal ideation was found to be stronger among patients characterised by a high level of goal disengagement but a low level of goal reengagement than among patients with a high level of goal disengagement and a high level of goal reengagement.

The interaction effect observed by Wrosch and his colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b) among young adults is of specific interest for our investigation of the consequences of students' reactions to unattainable educational goals. This result differs from these authors' general assumption of the necessity to combine goal disengagement and reengagement (Wrosch et al., 2003a). There is a need to further explore this interaction between both processes and to check the specific pattern observed by Wrosch and his colleagues among young adults (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b). Moreover, studies by these authors have investigated goal reengagement as a general individual tendency. Further research could complement this work by a study of the consequences of reengagement to a specific goal (e.g., an educational goal).

The Current Study

The current study is aimed at applying this emerging literature on the adaptive self-regulation of unattainable goals to a context where goal unattainability is frequently encountered. As explained above, in their first year at university a relatively large proportion of students will begin to perceive their initial educational goal as unattainable. Is remaining committed to such a goal negative in this context? Are goal disengagement and goal reengagement positive adaptive processes for students faced with unattainable educational goals? Our specific hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1. When the educational goal is perceived as highly attainable, goal commitment positively influences subjective well-being. When the educational goal is perceived as unattainable, this positive impact disappears, or even becomes negative.

Hypothesis 2. When the educational goal is perceived as highly attainable, goal disengagement negatively influences subjective well-being. When the educational goal is perceived as unattainable, this negative impact disappears, or even becomes positive.

Hypothesis 3. When the educational goal is perceived as unattainable, the positive effect of goal reengagement on subjective well-being is stronger if goal disengagement is low.

Three indicators of subjective well-being were investigated in the present study: satisfaction with life, depression, and self-mastery. Satisfaction with life has been defined as "a global evaluation by the person of his or her life" (Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991, p. 150). Self-mastery is defined as the degree to which individuals possess perceived personal control over life outcomes (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Finally, depression is characterised by intrusive negative ideas about the world, the future, and the self (Beck, Steer, Ball, & Ranieri, 1996).

The choice of several indicators is based on Lucas, Diener, and Suh (1996) who highlighted the value of examining a variety of global evaluations of well-being. The choice of these three specific indicators is based on both the literature on subjective well-being, and the main studies of goal disengagement and reengagement (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b). Depression, satisfaction with life and self-mastery were all investigated in these studies. The most significant results obtained by Wrosch et al. (2003b) on the impact of goal disengagement and goal reengagement on well-being were found when self-mastery and depression were used as indicators of this well-being.

The literature on subjective well-being has also highlighted the specificities of these three indicators. Satisfaction with life represents a first facet of subjective well-being, the facet of the cognitive judgment (Caplan, Tripathi, & Naidu, 1985; Lucas et al., 1996). Depression belongs to a second facet, the emotional aspect consisting, inter alia, of negative affects. These two facets are clearly different aspects of subjective well-being, although they are both influenced by a common predictor: self-mastery (Lai & McDonald, 1995; Marshall & Lang, 1990). Finally, depression occupies a particular status in terms of the strength of the negative indication of well-being it conveys. This indicator is considered as being at one extreme on the continuum of well-being, indicating a state of very low well-being (Abdel-Khalek, 2009).

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 357 Belgian French-speaking students who had obtained school-leaving qualifications which entitled them to enter university[2]. Some 55% of them were female and 42% were male (9 missing values). Their mean age was 19.29 (*SD* = 0.78). The modal level of education among the participants' mothers' was a bachelor's degree (i.e., a three year degree) (35.6%), and among their fathers it was a master's degree (i.e., a five year degree) (40.6%).

Most of the participants (*n* = 317) were registered in the first year of a study programme at university. The other 40 students had also begun higher education, but had dropped out after no more than four months. They then decided to follow the Formation Relais©[3], a training aimed at helping students to define new educational goals, while maintaining their level of knowledge in maths and their mother tongue. We chose to supplement our sample of first-year college students with these 40 students who had actually dropped out in order to collect data on a larger part of the continuum of goal disengagement. These 40 students were coded (1) whereas the other 317 students who continued their courses were coded (0). This code was used as an indicator of actual goal disengagement in the test of Hypothesis 2.

Data were collected through self-completion questionnaires in two waves: Wave 1 (T1) in the middle of the academic year (February 2010) and Wave 2 (T2) just before the end of the academic year (May 2010). The aim of the first wave was to measure students' commitment to the educational goal they were pursuing (by choosing the study programme they had registered in at the beginning of the academic year). Their perception of goal attainability and their envisaged goal disengagement were also measured at this time, as well as their subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life, depression, and self-mastery). Students' subjective well-being was

[2] The Belgian educational system is quite specific in some respects. Students having successfully completed high school (whatever their GPA level) and having received their upper secondary education certificate have unrestricted access to any form of higher education. Students choose freely the institutions and the study program in which they wish to enroll. They will then be accepted without any access restriction. Moreover, changing from one study domain to another, or from one college to another, is very easy. Therefore, when students encounter difficulties during the academic year, they are quite easily tented to question, or even to give up, their educational choice.

[3] The Formation Relais© is a training offered by a non-profit-making organization of social advancement education for students who have begun higher education, but have dropped out after a few months. This training is aimed at helping them to define new educational goals.

measured again at T2. Because we needed to shorten the time this second questionnaire took to answer, only depression and self-mastery were measured at T2. This second wave of measurement also covered students' commitment to the educational goal they were pursuing either by continuing to study the same subject in the next academic year or by choosing a new subject for the next academic year. Students who indicated that they wanted to continue in the same study programme were counted in the first group, while those who indicated that they wanted to change their study programme, and the 40 students who had dropped out, were included in the second.

Out of the total sample of 357 students, 186 took part in both T1 and T2, 117 only answered the questionnaire at T1, and 54 only answered at T2. Among the 186 students who completed both questionnaires, 19 were registered in the Formation Relais©. Hypotheses 1 and 2 will be tested on all the students who completed the questionnaire at T1, whereas Hypothesis 3 will be tested on the students who answered both questionnaires. The students who only took part at T1 did not differ significantly from those who took part at T1 and T2 on either educational goal commitment ($t(202) = –1.85$; *ns*), envisaged educational goal disengagement ($t(293) = 1.89$; *ns*), actual educational goal disengagement ($t(205) = 1.84$; *ns*), educational goal attainability ($t(279) = –0.85$; *ns*), satisfaction with life ($t(287) = –0.29$; *ns*), depression ($t(286) = 0.38$; *ns*), or self-mastery ($t(286) = 0.48$; *ns*).

To contact the participants, we used a database of postal or email addresses given by students at the end of an earlier study conducted in the last year of secondary school. All the students who had supplied their contact details received two questionnaires by post or email, one at T1 and the other at T2. The Formation Relais© students completed the T1 and T2 questionnaires during one of their class sessions.

Measures

All items on the questionnaires were rated on 5-point Likert-type scales, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). All the participants (the 317 students who continued their courses and the 40 students who dropped out) answered to the following measures.

Educational goal commitment.

Sixteen items, mainly adapted from the measures developed by Brunstein (1993), by Hollenbeck, Klein, O'Leary, and Wright (1989), and by Wrosch et al. (2003b), were used to measure the extent to which the students were committed to their educational goal (e.g., "I am willing to put forth a lot of effort, beyond what I'm used to, in order to attain this goal"). This measure was used at T1 (α = .91) and at T2 (α = .86).

Envisaged educational goal disengagement.

The four items of the Goal Disengagement Scale (Wrosch et al., 2003b) were adapted to measure the ease with which students think they would be able to reduce their effort and relinquish commitment toward their educational goal if they saw it as having become unattainable (e.g., "I would stay committed to the goal for a long time; I couldn't let it go" (inverted item)). These four items were expressed in a slightly different form for the 40 students who had already dropped out. They were asked the ease with which they are able to reduce their effort and relinquish commitment toward their initial educational goal (e.g., "I stay committed to the goal for a long time; I cannot let it go" (inverted item)). This construct was measured at T1 (α = .74).

Perceived educational goal attainability.

Ten items, mainly adapted from Galand (2001), were used to measure students' perceptions of their ability to pursue and attain their educational goal (e.g., "Whatever the efforts I'm putting in, I won't be able to reach this goal" (inverted item)). This construct was measured at T1 (α = .84).

Subjective well-being.

Satisfaction with life.

To measure this first dimension of subjective well-being, the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"). This construct was measured at T1 (α = .83).

Depression.

Ten items were adapted from two depression scales, namely the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1996) and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (Zung, 1965), to assess students' depression (e.g., "My life is pretty full" (inverted item)). This measure was used at T1 (α = .86) and at T2 (α = .86).

Self-mastery.

To measure students' perceptions of self-mastery, five items from Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) Self-Mastery Scale were used (e.g., "I have little control over the things that happen to me" (inverted item)). This measure was used at T1 (α = .87) and at T2 (α = .86).

A factorial analysis was conducted on all the items from these three well-being dimensions measured at T1. As expected, these items saturated on three different factors, a first one representing satisfaction with life, a second one representing depression and a third one representing self-mastery. These factors explained 55.98% of the variance. Therefore, even if all these items are supposed to measure well-being, the three dimensions were kept separated.

Results

Three participants had some outliers (+/– 3 standard deviations from the mean) and were excluded from the analyses. The means and standard deviations of the measures taken at T1 and T2 are shown in Table 1. Table 2 gives the correlations between the measures. The indicator of actual goal disengagement is not included in Table 1 because it is a dichotomous variable (0 = the 317 students who continued their courses; 1 = the 40 students who dropped out). However, this indicator is included in Table 2 to investigate its link with the other variables.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1, that the impact of goal commitment on subjective well-being is moderated by perceived attainability of the goal, was tested at T1. To test this moderated effect, three multiple regressions were conducted to predict each of the three aspects of subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life, depression, and self-mastery). Each regression included goal

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the scales.

Variables	*M*	*SD*
Educational goal commitment T1	3.97	0.33
Educational goal commitment T2	4.07	0.25
Envisaged educational goal disengagement T1	1.50	0.27
Perceived educational goal attainability T1	3.53	0.59
Satisfaction with life T1	3.57	0.76
Depression T1	2.31	0.72
Depression T2	2.25	0.69
Self-mastery T1	3.60	0.83
Self-mastery T2	3.69	0.78

commitment as an independent variable, perceived goal attainability as a moderator variable, and the product of the independent and the moderator variables (i.e., the interaction) as a third predictor[4]. The moderator hypothesis is supported if the interaction is significant (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The results of these regressions are presented in Table 3.

The three dimensions of subjective well-being were all significantly predicted by perceived goal attainability (satisfaction with life: $\beta = .45$, $p < .001$; depression: $\beta = -.62$, $p < .001$; self-mastery: $\beta = .44$, $p < .001$). Moreover, as postulated by Hypothesis 1, all these three dimensions were significantly influenced by the interaction between goal commitment and perceived goal attainability (satisfaction with life: $\beta = .14$, $p < .01$; depression: $\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$; self-mastery: $\beta = .18$, $p < .01$). These interaction effects were probed using the Johnson-Neyman (J-N) technique to get a better understanding of the conditions under which the impact of goal commitment on subjective well-being is strong or weak, or, positive or negative. This technique overcomes the limitations of two other approaches widely used in the literature for analysing interactions, namely the subgroup analysis and the pick-a-point approach. One of the main problems with these two traditional methods is that they involve arbitrary cut-off procedures to determine the subgroups or to select values of the moderator at which to probe the interaction (Hayes & Matthes, 2009; Stone-Romero & Anderson, 1994). The J-N technique identifies regions

[4] All the multiple regression analyses for the three hypotheses were performed using centered predictor variables.

Table 2. Correlations between the scales.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Ed. goal commitment T1	1.00									
2. Ed. goal commitment T2	.38***	1.00								
3. Envisaged ed. goal disengagement T1	– .64***	– .28***	1.00							
4. Actual ed. goal disengagement	– .50***	.13*	.37***	1.00						
5. Perceived ed. goal attainability T1	.47***	.07	– .38***	– .28***	1.00					
6. Satisfaction with life T1	.30***	.07	– .23***	– .28***	.48***	1.00				
7. Depression T1	– .35***	– .12	.29***	.26***	– .63***	– .72***	1.00			
8. Depression T2	– .09	– .33***	.11	– .13	– .33***	– .36***	.56***	1.00		
9. Self-mastery T1	.26***	.19*	– .18**	– .22***	.44***	.51***	– .67***	– .35***	1.00	
10. Self-mastery T2	.03	.31***	– .02	.09	.27***	.30***	– .46***	– .66***	.56***	1.00

Note. Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Multiple regressions to predict satisfaction with life T1, depression T1, and self-mastery T1, with educational goal commitment T1, perceived educational goal attainability T1, and the product of educational goal commitment T1 and perceived educational goal attainability T1 as predictors.

	R 1 Satisfaction with life T1 (DV)			R 2 Depression T1 (DV)			R 3 Self-mastery T1 (DV)		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Constant	3.54	0.04		2.34	0.04		3.54	0.05	
Ed. goal commitment T1 (IV)	0.25	0.14	.11	– 0.19	0.11	– .09	0.18	0.15	.07
Perceived ed. goal attainability T1 (MV)	0.59	0.08	.45***	– 0.76	0.07	– .62***	0.63	0.09	.44***
IV x MV	0.47	0.18	.14**	– 0.37	0.15	– .12*	0.66	0.19	.18**
R^2		.25			.42			.23	

Note. R = regression; DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; MV = moderator variable; Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

within the range of the moderator variable where the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is statistically significant and regions where it is not (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). It avoids the potential arbitrariness of the traditional methods by mathematically deriving the point or points along the continuum of the moderator that delimit(s) these regions.

The results of the J-N analysis for satisfaction with life showed that a value of perceived goal attainability of 3.57 defined the limit of the region of significance for goal commitment. Above this level of perceived goal attainability, goal commitment had a significant positive impact on satisfaction with life. When perceived goal attainability was equal to or lower than 3.57, this impact became non-significant. For the prediction of depression, the critical value of perceived goal attainability was 3.62. Above this level of perceived goal attainability, depression decreased significantly with goal commitment, but when goal attainability was at or below 3.62, the impact of goal commitment on depression was non-significant. For the prediction of self-mastery, there were two regions where goal commitment had a significant effect. When perceived goal attainability was higher than 3.73, goal commitment had a significant positive impact on self-mastery, and when perceived goal attainability was lower than 2.57, goal commitment had a significant negative impact on self-mastery. Between these two values, the impact of goal commitment was non-significant.

These results confirm that the impact of goal commitment on subjective well-being is moderated by perceived goal attainability, as postulated by Hypothesis 1. More specifically, when the educational goal is perceived as relatively attainable, satisfaction with life increases and depression decreases with goal commitment. When the goal is perceived as unattainable, the impact of goal commitment disappears. Even more strikingly, the direction of the impact of goal commitment on self-mastery changes depending on the level of perceived goal attainability. This impact is significantly positive when the goal is perceived as relatively attainable, but it is significantly negative when the goal is perceived as relatively unattainable.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis, that the impact of goal disengagement on subjective well-being is moderated by perceived goal attainability, was also tested at T1. Two indicators of goal disengagement were used: envisaged and actual disengagement. Therefore, six multiple regressions were needed to test the moderated effect postulated by Hypothesis 2. Each regression

predicted one of the three aspects of subjective well-being using one of the two indicators of goal disengagement as the independent variable. Perceived goal attainability (i.e., the moderator variable) and the product of the independent variable and the moderator variable were included in each regression. The results of these regressions are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4 shows the results of the three regressions using envisaged goal disengagement as the independent variable. The three dimensions of subjective well-being were all significantly predicted by perceived goal attainability (satisfaction with life: $\beta = .47$, $p < .001$; depression: $\beta = –.62$, $p < .001$; self-mastery: $\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). Moreover, only one of these three dimensions, namely self-mastery ($\beta = –.13$; $p < .05$), was significantly predicted by the interaction between envisaged goal disengagement and perceived goal attainability. More specifically, the J-N technique showed two regions of significance for the impact of envisaged goal disengagement. When perceived goal attainability was higher than 4.23, envisaged goal disengagement had a significant negative impact on self-mastery. However, when perceived goal attainability was lower than 2.11, envisaged goal disengagement has a significant positive impact on self-mastery. Between these two values, the impact was not significant.

Table 5 shows the results of the three regressions using actual goal disengagement as the independent variable. The three dimensions of subjective well-being were all significantly predicted by perceived goal attainability (satisfaction with life: $\beta = .45$, $p < .001$; depression: $\beta = –.62$, $p < .001$; self-mastery: $\beta = .42$, $p < .001$) and by actual goal disengagement (satisfaction with life: $\beta = –.28$, $p < .001$; depression: $\beta = .16$, $p < .01$; self-mastery: $\beta = –.14$, $p < .05$). Moreover, two of the three dimensions of subjective well-being were significantly predicted by the interaction between actual goal disengagement and perceived goal attainability. This interaction had a significant impact on satisfaction with life ($\beta = –.24$; $p < .001$) and on depression ($\beta = .14$; $p < .05$). The J-N technique showed two regions of significance for the impact of actual goal disengagement on satisfaction with life: when perceived goal attainability was higher than 3.05, actual goal disengagement was a significant negative predictor; however, when perceived goal attainability was lower than 2.18, actual goal disengagement was a significant positive predictor; between these values, the impact was not significant. For depression, there was only one region of significance: when perceived goal attainability was

Table 4. Multiple regressions to predict satisfaction with life T1, depression T1, and self-mastery T1, with envisaged educational goal disengagement T1, perceived educational goal attainability T1, and the product of envisaged educational goal disengagement T1 and perceived educational goal attainability T1 as predictors.

	R 1			R 2			R 3		
	Satisfaction with life T1 (DV)			Depression T1 (DV)			Self-mastery T1 (DV)		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Constant	3.56	0.04		2.32	0.04		3.56	0.05	
Envisaged ed. goal disengagement T1 (IV)	– 0.20	0.16	– .07	0.21	0.13	.08	– 0.09	0.18	– .03
Perceived ed. goal attainability T1 (MV)	0.61	0.07	.47***	– 0.76	0.06	– .62***	0.65	0.08	.45***
IV x MV	– 0.41	0.21	– .10	0.28	0.18	.07	– 0.58	0.24	– .13*
R^2		.25			.42			.22	

Note. R = regression; DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; MV = moderator variable; Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Multiple regressions to predict satisfaction with life T1, depression T1, and self-mastery T1, with actual educational goal disengagement, perceived educational goal attainability T1, and the product of actual educational goal disengagement and perceived educational goal attainability T1 as predictors.

	R 1 Satisfaction with life T1 (DV)			R 2 Depression T1 (DV)			R 3 Self-mastery T1 (DV)		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Constant	3.56	0.04		2.32	0.03		3.59	0.05	
Actual ed. goal disengagement (IV)	– 0.62	0.13	– .28***	0.33	0.11	.16**	– 0.33	0.15	– .14*
Perceived ed. goal attainability T1 (MV)	0.59	0.07	.45***	– 0.76	0.06	– .62***	0.59	0.08	.42***
IV x MV	– 0.79	0.19	– .24***	0.43	0.17	.14*	– 0.27	0.22	– .08
R^2		.29			.42			.21	

Note. R = regression; DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; MV = moderator variable; Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

above 3.22, depression increased significantly with actual goal disengagement, but at or below this level the impact of actual goal disengagement on depression was not significant.

Taken together, these results confirm that the impact of goal disengagement on subjective well-being is moderated by perceived goal attainability, as postulated by Hypothesis 2. More specifically, this moderated impact was shown (1) for the prediction of self-mastery using envisaged goal disengagement as the independent variable, and (2) for the prediction of satisfaction with life and depression using actual goal disengagement as the independent variable. When the goal was perceived as highly attainable, depression increased significantly with actual goal disengagement, but there was no such impact when the goal was perceived as unattainable. The effect of actual goal disengagement on satisfaction with life was even more marked, and indeed it changed direction depending on the level of perceived goal attainability. This was also true for the impact of envisaged goal disengagement on self-mastery. The moderating effect of goal disengagement on the various dimensions of subjective well-being therefore depended on which indicator of goal disengagement was used. Moreover, Tables 4 and 5 showed a main effect of actual disengagement on each of the three dimensions of subjective well-being, but no significant main effects with envisaged disengagement. It seems that actual disengagement is a stronger predictor of subjective well-being than envisaged disengagement.

Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis concerned the potential interaction effect between goal disengagement and goal reengagement in predicting subjective well-being. This hypothesis only applied to students perceiving their educational goal as unattainable. To investigate the entire process of disengagement from a perceived unattainable goal and reengagement to a new goal, two measurement times are needed, and so this hypothesis was tested on the students who had completed questionnaires at both T1 and T2. To assess students' reengagement, we used the measure of goal commitment at T2. Indeed, given that we will focus on the students who perceived their educational goal as unattainable at T1, this measure indicates students' degree of commitment to the educational goal they are pursuing by choosing their subject for the next academic year after being confronted with a perceived unattainable goal.

Hypothesis 3 postulates that subjective well-being at T2 depends on the interaction between three predictors: perception of goal attainability at T1, goal disengagement at T1, and

goal commitment at T2. Multiple regressions including this triple interaction were conducted to predict well-being at T2 controlling for its level at T1. More specifically, four multiple regressions were run, two predicting depression at T2 (one using envisaged disengagement as a predictor, and the other using actual disengagement) and the other two predicting self-mastery at T2 (again, one for each indicator of disengagement).

Only one of the four regressions revealed a significant triple interaction. The results of this regression are presented in Table 6. Three main effects were revealed: a positive impact of the control variable, namely depression at T1 ($\beta = .57$; $p < .001$), a negative impact of goal commitment at T2 ($\beta = –.26$; $p < .001$), and a negative impact of envisaged goal disengagement at T1 ($\beta = –.16$; $p < .05$). Moreover, as postulated by Hypothesis 3, the level of depression at T2 was significantly predicted by the interaction between goal commitment at T2, envisaged goal disengagement at T1 and perceived goal attainability at T1 ($\beta = .19$; $p < .01$).

We could not directly explore this complex interaction using the J-N technique because this technique is only designed to test simple moderated effect. Therefore, we first had to use a more traditional approach for probing interactions, namely subgroup analysis. However, in order to avoid as far as possible the arbitrariness of this method, we based our choice of the value(s) of the moderator used to split the sample into subgroups on what we had learnt from the applications of the J-N technique in the test of Hypothesis 2. More specifically, we considered the regression where disengagement was a predictor of depression because it was the most similar to the present situation, and took the value of 3.22 on the continuum of perceived goal attainability as our dividing point. The sample was split into two subsamples at this point, and a multiple regression analysis was conducted on each subsample to predict depression at T2. Based on Hypothesis 3, we should observe an interaction effect between disengagement at T1 and commitment at T2 in the subsample characterised by a low level of perceived goal attainability. The results are presented in Table 7.

In the subgroup of students who had perceived their goal as being unattainable at T1 (subgroup 1), two main effects were revealed: a positive impact of the control variable, namely depression at T1 ($\beta = .55$; $p < .001$) and a negative impact of goal commitment at T2 ($\beta = –.32$; $p < .05$). Moreover, as postulated by Hypothesis 3, the interaction between goal commitment at T2 and goal disengagement at T1 was significant in this subgroup ($\beta = –.37$; $p < .01$). In the

Table 6. Multiple regression to predict depression T2, controlling for depression T1, with envisaged educational goal disengagement T1, perceived educational goal attainability T1, educational goal commitment T2, the three 2x2 products of these variables, and the product of the three variables as predictors.

	Depression T2 (DV)		
	B	*SE B*	β
Constant	2.23	0.04	
Depression T1 (CV)	0.57	0.07	.57***
Ed. goal commitment T2 (IV)	– 0.72	0.18	– .26***
Perceived ed. goal attainability T1 (MV1)	– 0.05	0.09	– .04
Envisaged ed. goal disengagement T1 (MV2)	– 0.44	0.07	– .16*
IV x MV1	0.46	0.30	.10
IV x MV2	– 1.13	0.66	– .11
MV1 x MV2	0.14	0.21	.04
IV x MV1 x MV2	2.47	0.81	.19**
R^2		.48	

Note. DV = dependent variable; CV = control variable; IV = independent variable; MV = moderator variable; Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 7. Multiple regression to predict depression T2, controlling for depression T1, with envisaged educational goal disengagement T1, educational goal commitment T2, and the product of envisaged educational goal disengagement T1 and educational goal commitment T2 as predictors: subgroup analysis.

	Depression T2 (DV)					
	SG1: low-level of perceived ed. goal attainability (≤ 3.22)			SG2: high-level of perceived ed. goal attainability (> 3.22)		
	B	*SE B*	β	*B*	*SE B*	β
Constant	2.28	0.12		2.15	0.05	
Depression T1 (CV)	0.68	0.14	.55***	0.47	0.08	.48***
Ed. goal commitment T2 (IV)	– 0.96	0.38	– .32*	– 0.83	0.20	– .34***
Envisaged ed. goal disengagement T1 (MV)	– 0.44	0.33	– .15	– 0.51	0.20	– .20*
IV x MV	– 3.96	1.31	– .37**	– 0.42	0.69	– .05
R^2		.53			.35	

Note. DV = dependent variable; SG = subgroup; CV = control variable; IV = independent variable; MV = moderator variable; Ed. = educational.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

subgroup characterised by a high level of perceived goal attainability at T1 (subgroup 2), we found a main effect of all three predictors: a positive impact of the control variable, namely depression at T1 (β = .48; $p < .001$), a negative impact of goal commitment at T2 (β = –.34; $p < .001$), and a negative impact of envisaged goal disengagement at T1 (β = –.20; $p < .05$). The interaction was not significant in this subgroup.

The significant simple interaction observed in subgroup 1 was explored using the J-N technique. This technique showed one region of significance: when envisaged goal disengagement was above 1.46, depression at T2 decreased significantly with goal reengagement, but at or below this level the impact of goal reengagement on depression was not significant. These results confirmed that goal disengagement and goal reengagement interact in their effect on subjective well-being when the goal is perceived as unattainable, but did not support the specific interaction effect postulated by Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

This study has investigated the consequences of goal commitment, goal disengagement, and goal reengagement on subjective well-being, when faced with an unattainable educational goal. In this section, we discuss the results for each of our three hypotheses. Then, suggestions for future research and for counselling are formulated.

Commitment to a Goal which is Perceived to be Unattainable

We hypothesised that the size, or even the direction, of the impact of goal commitment on subjective well-being would depend on the perceived goal attainability (Hypothesis 1). The results supported this moderation hypothesis. The size of the impact of goal commitment on satisfaction with life and on depression was influenced by the perceived attainability of the goal. Even more strikingly, the direction of the impact of goal commitment on self-mastery was influenced by the perceived attainability of the goal.

Our results confirm the important caveat entered into the generally positive role of commitment to personal goals by some researchers (e.g., Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Pomerantz et al., 2000; Wrosch et al., 2003b): when goals are perceived as unfeasible, it is no longer true that being highly committed is positive in terms of subjective well-being (satisfaction with life and depression). Furthermore, being highly committed to a goal perceived as unattainable had a negative impact on one of the dimensions of well-being, namely self-mastery, in line with Carver and Scheier's (1990) more specific assumption. Maintaining their determination and willingness to invest effort in attaining a goal when they feel that they are not able to make any progress towards attaining this goal decreases people's general perception of their control over their life.

Disengagement from a Perceived Unattainable Goal

Does goal disengagement have a positive impact on well-being even if it is not accompanied by reengagement to a new goal? We hypothesised that the size, or even the direction, of the impact of goal disengagement on subjective well-being depends on the perceived goal attainability (Hypothesis 2). Overall, our results supported this moderation hypothesis. More specifically, the effect on the various dimensions of subjective well-being depended on which

indicator of goal disengagement was used as a predictor. We measured both envisaged and actual disengagement. Students' envisaged goal disengagement only had an impact on their feelings of self-mastery when moderated by their perception of goal attainability. Moderations were found for the other two dimensions of subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life and depression) when using actual goal disengagement as a predictor. In other words, combining the results relative to both indicators of goal disengagement, Hypothesis 2 was significantly supported on each well-being dimension.

The size of the impact of actual goal disengagement on students' level of depression depended on the perceived attainability of the goal. For the other two moderations, the direction of the impact of goal disengagement on subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life and self-mastery) changed depending on perceived goal attainability. By showing the positive impact of disengagement from a perceived unattainable goal on these two dimensions of subjective well-being, we have replicated the work of Wrosch and his colleagues (e.g., Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999; Wrosch et al., 2003b) in a specific area (college students pursuing educational goals). The recent, unorthodox, idea that disengagement from unattainable goals has beneficial effects on subjective well-being is becoming better established. More specifically, our finding of a positive role for an envisaged disengagement from a perceived unattainable goal on self-mastery supported the positive association found by Wrosch and his colleagues between the general tendency to disengage and self-mastery (Wrosch et al., 2003b). On the other hand, goal disengagement was only found to have a moderated effect on satisfaction with life when actual disengagement was used as the indicator of goal disengagement. It seems that a disengagement that is only envisaged is not strong enough to influence satisfaction with life. An actual disengagement from the unattainable goal is necessary to enhance this satisfaction. This result also supports the need to investigate both envisaged and actual goal disengagement.

Finally, the results obtained in the prediction of depression also supported Hypothesis 2. Depression increased significantly with actual disengagement from a goal perceived as attainable, whereas the impact of disengagement from a goal perceived as unattainable on depression was not significant. In other words, disengagement from an unattainable goal did not decrease depression, whereas it increased satisfaction with life and self-mastery. The results relative to the interaction between disengagement and reengagement seem to indicate that, in order to decrease

depression, disengagement from the unattainable goal has to be accompanied by reengagement with a new goal.

Interaction between Goal Disengagement and Goal Reengagement

Our results showed a main effect of goal reengagement on depression at T2. Depression decreased as goal reengagement increased, as found by Wrosch et al. (2003b). However, among students who saw their goal as unattainable (i.e., the subsample concerned by Hypothesis 3), this main effect was smaller than the effect of the interaction between goal disengagement at T1 and goal reengagement at T2. The presence of this interaction confirmed our general assumption of an interaction effect between disengagement and reengagement in predicting subjective well-being. However, the specific interaction postulated by Hypothesis 3 was not supported. This hypothesis was based on the interactions found among young adults by Wrosch and his colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b). In their studies, young adults' reengagement was found to compensate for their inability to disengage. The interaction in our sample of young adults was different. We found a positive impact of goal reengagement on subjective well-being (i.e., a decrease in depression) only among students who had previously disengaged. Therefore, goal reengagement did not compensate for low goal disengagement. Conversely, it needed to be preceded by high goal disengagement. Taking the results relative to Hypotheses 2 and 3 together, disengagement was not sufficient to decrease depression, and reengagement could neither decrease depression if it was not preceded by disengagement. In other words, a combination of disengagement and reengagement seems to be necessary to decrease the depression of students faced with unattainable educational goals. This conclusion is in line with the Wrosch et al.'s (2003a) initial assumption that goal disengagement is an adaptive response when it leads to the adoption of alternative goals.

Why do we observe a different interaction effect than the one observed by Wrosch and his colleagues among young adults (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b)? Wrosch et al. (2003b) suggested age-differential interaction effects. We complement this by suggesting that the interaction between disengagement and reengagement also depends on the indicator of well-being that is investigated. Wrosch and his colleagues showed this interaction on four indicators: self-mastery, perceived stress, affect balance, and life satisfaction (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b). These four interactions are approximately the same, but are clearly different from our

interaction effect demonstrated on depression. Compared to the four indicators used by Wrosch and his colleagues, depression is considered as a well-being dimension which has a particularly strong negative character (Abdel-Khalek, 2009). Indeed, being depressed is in general a stronger indicator of distress than being stressed. Moreover, depression more strongly indicates the individual's distress than self-mastery, affect balance, and life satisfaction indicates the individual's well-being. In other words, depression occupies a more extreme position on the continuum of well-being than self-mastery, perceived stress, affect balance and life satisfaction. To have an impact at this negative end of the continuum of well-being, the sole disengagement or the sole reengagement is not sufficient, they have to be combined.

This analysis of the differences between the results from Wrosch and his colleagues (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2003b) and the one from the present study can be extended to an analysis of the differences within our results relative to Hypothesis 3, depending on the dimension of subjective well-being considered (i.e., depression or self-mastery). The triple interaction between goal attainability, goal disengagement, and goal reengagement was significant only for the prediction of depression at T2, not for the prediction of self-mastery at T2. The regressions conducted to test Hypothesis 3 on self-mastery only showed one significant predictor: disengagement. This argues for continuing to examine a variety of evaluations of well-being in future research (Lucas et al., 1996) and supports our choice to investigate the three dimensions of well-being separately. Such investigations are needed to replicate this differentiated pattern of results. However we can already suggest some possible explanations for these results. As explained above, self-mastery is considered as a well-being dimension which occupies a less extreme position on the continuum of well-being than depression. We suggest that is it easier to have an impact in the middle part of the continuum than at its ends. Therefore, to increase self-mastery among students who are faced with unattainable goals, the sole disengagement is sufficient. Conversely, as it was suggested above, a combination of disengagement and reengagement seems to be necessary to decrease depression, due to the particularly strong negative character of this indicator (Abdel-Khalek, 2009).

Moreover, we suggest particularly strong links (1) between goal disengagement and self-mastery, and (2) between goal reengagement and depression. Disengagement puts an end at a phase of commitment to a goal that students were unable to attain whatever their efforts. It

constitutes the first sign of the resumption of control over life, and as such, is an important process for the enhancing of self-mastery. Goal reengagement is supposed to appear after disengagement and, therefore, does not have this crucial role of being for students the first indicator of their renewed control. That's why, at least in our study, goal reengagement does not have any impact on self-mastery. However, Wrosch et al. (2003b) showed such an impact, but it was particularly marked when goal disengagement was low. Results from these authors seem to indicate that reengagement can be a sign of renewed control and therefore can enhance self-mastery if the first potential sign (i.e., disengagement) was lacking. However, this specific role of reengagement could not be showed in our results.

As disengagement seems to be specifically linked to self-mastery, we suggest that reengagement is crucial to overcome depression. More than the other dimensions of subjective well-being, depression is linked to having purpose for living (e.g., Hedberg, Gustafson, Alèx, & Brulin, 2010; Robak & Griffin, 2000). Therefore, as suggested by Brandtstädter and Renner (1990), students specifically need to give their lives a new direction to overcome the depression phase frequently linked to encountering an unattainable goal.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite these interesting results, some limitations of our study have to be noted. On the one hand, only a few students who had actually disengaged from their initial educational goal took part in the study, and even fewer were still present at T2. It is quite difficult to contact students who have dropped out and to persuade them to participate in a study in the educational domain. Our methodology was unusual in being specifically aimed at including this type of student, but more effort should have been devoted to encouraging them to take part at T2. Indeed, the loss of more than an half of this specific sample at T2 could be one of the reasons why the triple interaction was not significant when using actual disengagement as a moderator in the prediction of depression at T2. Future research should continue to work with drop-out students, particularly given that actual disengagement seemed to be a stronger predictor than envisaged disengagement. Indeed, a main effect of actual disengagement was observed on each of the three well-being dimensions at T1, whereas envisaged disengagement had no significant impact on these dimensions measured at T1. One main effect of envisaged disengagement was still shown

on depression at T2, more specifically in the subsample not concerned by Hypothesis 3 (i.e., students who saw their goal as attainable).

On the other hand, in some respects, our results required careful interpretations. First, the probing of the interaction effect for Hypothesis 3 had to use a sub-optimal method, namely subgroup analysis. This analysis was conducted in a way which avoided its potential arbitrariness as far as possible. However, this result for the interaction effect between goal disengagement and reengagement needs future replications. Second, to measure most of our variables, we used English-language scales. These scales were carefully translated in French. The original English scales and the French translations were compared by experts in psychological research and in English language. However, the whole back translation procedure was not strictly applied. This procedure should be developed before future uses of these scales. Third, the cross-sectional design used for the test of Hypotheses 1 and 2 and the short longitudinal design used for Hypothesis 3 do not allow causal interpretations. Future research should conduct experimental work and use finer-grained longitudinal designs to investigate the causal relationships between goal commitment, disengagement, reengagement, and subjective well-being. Fourth, even if we focused on the interaction effects to test our moderation hypotheses, these interactions were not necessarily the strongest predictors of well-being. In most of our regression analyses, the most important predictor was perceived goal attainability (see Tables 3, 4, and 5). This central role of self-efficacy in the prediction of well-being has already been the focus of other studies (e.g., Moeini et al., 2008; Muris, 2002). Finally, our measure of goal attainability was aimed at assessing the perception students have of the degree of attainability of their educational goal. However, there could be a discrepancy between students' actual perception and what they choose to tell us by answering to the items. For example, students may be tempted to say that their goal is not attainable even if they believe that it is attainable. By doing this, they may preserve their self-esteem because the issue of their goal pursuit can only be better than what they were saying. Moreover, they may find it too arrogant to say that they are totally able to attain their goal. However, even if our measure of goal attainability does maybe not exactly correspond to what students believe, there is evidence that this measure is not either just something that students tell us without any link to their reality. The measure of perceived attainability is significantly correlated (r = .42; p < .001) to students' achievement percentage obtained at the first examination session (January 2010). It seems therefore that what students tell us about the

attainability of their goal corresponds at least partially to their beliefs because what they tell us is linked to their past performance which is considered as a strong predictor of students' efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997).

Conclusions and Implications

In sum, the present research showed that both the positive impact of goal commitment on subjective well-being and the negative impact of goal disengagement on subjective well-being found when the perceived attainability of an educational goal was high, disappeared or even changed direction when the educational goal was perceived as unattainable. Moreover, to decrease students' depression, reengagement to an alternative educational goal after having disengaged from the goal perceived as unattainable was needed. Therefore, the current study contributes to a growing body of evidence which shows that (1) in situations involving unattainable goals, being highly committed is no longer a positive factor in terms of subjective well-being, and (2) goal disengagement and reengagement are part of the adaptive self-regulation of unattainable goals.

Counselling interventions should take these important caveats about the well-known positive role of goal commitment into account when advising students. More specifically, counsellors should help students to become aware that the educational goal to which they are currently committed could become unattainable. It would be interesting to work with students on their reactions when they realise that their goal is unattainable, given the consequences of these reactions for subjective well-being. It could be helpful for students who will face difficulties in the pursuit of their educational goal to be aware that it is not unusual to encounter such difficulties, and that, in certain circumstances, it is important to be able to disengage from an unrealistic goal. Counsellors should work with students on how to renounce an initial goal, and how to develop alternative educational goals. They could help students by suggesting various ways of distancing oneself from the unattainable goal, of translating general interests into another specific educational goal, and of developing a new commitment when the previous one has to be abandoned.

References

Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2009). Religiosity, subjective well-being, and depression in Saudi children and adolescents. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 12*(8), 803-815. doi: 10.1080/13674670903006755

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY US: W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co.

Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator–mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*(6), 1173-1182.

Beck, A. T., Steer, R. A., Ball, R., & Ranieri, W. F. (1996). Comparison of Beck Depression Inventories IA and II in psychiatric outpatients. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 67*(3), 588-597.

Boudrenghien, G., Frenay, M., & Bourgeois, E. (2011). La transition de l'enseignement secondaire vers l'enseignement supérieur [Transition from high school to college]. In S. Neuville, M. Frenay, B. Noël & V. Wertz (Eds.), *Persévérer et réussir à l'Université [Persistence and Performance at University]* (in press). Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain.

Brandtstädter, J., & Renner, G. (1990). Tenacious goal pursuit and flexible goal adjustment: Explication and age-related analysis of assimilative and accommodative strategies of coping. *Psychology and Aging, 5*(1), 58-67.

Brandtstädter, J., & Rothermund, K. (2002). The life-course dynamics of goal pursuit and goal adjustment: A two-process framework. *Developmental Review, 22*(1), 117-150.

Brunstein, J. C. (1993). Personal goals and subjective well-being: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*(5), 1061-1070.

Brunstein, J. C., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (1996). Effects of failure on subsequent performance: The importance of self-defining goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70*(2), 395-407.

Caplan, R. D., Tripathi, R. C., & Naidu, R. K. (1985). Subjective past, present, and future fit: Effects on anxiety, depression, and other indicators of well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 48*(1), 180-197. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.48.1.180

Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1990). Origins and functions of positive and negative affect: A control-process view. *Psychological Review, 97*(1), 19-35.

Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1998). *On the Self-Regulation of Behavior*. New York, NY US: Cambridge University Press.

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*(1), 71-75.

Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology, 53*, 110-112.

Emmons, R. A. (1986). Personal strivings: An approach to personality and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*(5), 1058-1068.

Galand, B. (2001). *Nature et déterminants des phénomènes de violence en milieu scolaire. [Nature and determinants of manifestations of violence at school]*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

Germeijs, V., & Verschueren, K. (2007). High school students' career decision-making process: Consequences for choice implementation in higher education. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 70*, 223-241.

Hayes, A. F., & Matthes, J. (2009). Computational procedures for probing interactions in OLS and logistic regression: SPSS and SAS implementations. *Behavior Research Methods, 41*(3), 924-936.

Heckhausen, J., Wrosch, C., & Fleeson, W. (2001). Developmental regulation before and after a developmental deadline: The sample case of 'biological clock' for childbearing. *Psychology and Aging, 16*(3), 400-413.

Hedberg, P., Gustafson, Y., Alèx, L., & Brulin, C. (2010). Depression in relation to purpose in life among a very old population: A five-year follow-up study. *Aging & Mental Health, 14*(6), 757-763. doi: 10.1080/13607861003713216

Hollenbeck, J. R., Klein, H. J., O'Leary, A. M., & Wright, P. M. (1989). Investigation of the construct validity of a self-report measure of goal commitment. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 74*(6), 951-956.

Lai, D. W.-L., & McDonald, J. R. (1995). Life satisfaction of Chinese elderly immigrants in Calgary. *Canadian Journal on Aging, 14*(3), 536-552.

Lucas, R. E., Diener, E., & Suh, E. (1996). Discriminant validity of well-being measures. *Journal*

of Personality and Social Psychology, 71(3), 616-628. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.71.3.616

Marshall, G. N., & Lang, E. L. (1990). Optimism, self-mastery, and symptoms of depression in women professionals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*(1), 132-139. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.59.1.132

McGregor, I., & Little, B. R. (1998). Personal projects, happiness, and meaning: On doing well and being yourself. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*(2), 494-512.

Miller, R.-B., & Brickman, S.-J. (2004). A Model of Future-Oriented Motivation and Self-Regulation. *Educational Psychology Review, 16*(1), 9-33.

Moeini, B., Shafii, F., Hidarnia, A., Babaii, G. R., Birashk, B., & Allahverdipour, H. (2008). Perceived stress, self-efficacy and its relations to psychological well-being status in Iranian male high school students. *Social Behavior and Personality, 36*(2), 257-266. doi: 10.2224/sbp.2008.36.2.257

Muris, P. (2002). Relationships between self-efficacy and symptoms of anxiety disorders and depression in a normal adolescent sample. *Personality and Individual Differences, 32*(2), 337-348. doi: 10.1016/S0191-8869(01)00027-7

Neuville, S., Frenay, M., Schmitz, J., Boudrenghien, G., Noël, B., & Wertz, V. (2007). Tinto's theoretical perspective and expectancy-value paradigm: A confrontation to explain freshmen's academic achievement. *Psychologica Belgica, 47*(1-2), 31-50.

O'Connor, R. C., Fraser, L., Whyte, M.-C., MacHale, S., & Masterton, G. (2009). Self-regulation of unattainable goals in suicide attempters: The relationship between goal disengagement, goal reengagement and suicidal ideation. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 47*(2), 164-169. doi: 10.1016/j.brat.2008.11.001

Pavot, W. G., Diener, E., Colvin, C. R., & Sandvik, E. (1991). Further validation of the satisfaction with life scale: Evidence for the cross-method convergence of well-being measures. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 57*(1), 149-161. doi: 10.1207/s15327752jpa5701_17

Pearlin, L. I., & Schooler, C. (1978). The structure of coping. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19*(1), 2-21.

Pomerantz, E. M., Saxon, J. L., & Oishi, S. (2000). The psychological trade-offs of goal investment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(4), 617-630.

Robak, R. W., & Griffin, P. W. (2000). Purpose in life: What is its relationship to happiness,

depression, and grieving? *North American Journal of Psychology, 2*(1), 113-119.

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(4), 719-727.

Stone-Romero, E. F., & Anderson, L. E. (1994). Relative power of moderated multiple regression and the comparison of subgroup correlation coefficients for detecting moderating effects. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*(3), 354-359.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education, 68*(6), 599-623.

Webb, T. L., & Sheeran, P. (2005). Integrating concepts of goal theories to understand the achievement of personal goals. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 35*, 69-96.

Wrosch, C., & Heckhausen, J. (1999). Control processes before and after passing a developmental deadline: Activation and deactivation of intimate relationship goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*(2), 415-427.

Wrosch, C., Miller, G. E., Scheier, M. F., & Brun de Pontet, S. (2007). Giving up on unattainable goals: Benefits for health? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*, 251-265.

Wrosch, C., Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Schulz, R. (2003a). The importance of goal disengagement in adaptive self-regulation: When giving up is beneficial. *Self and Identity, 2*(1), 1-20.

Wrosch, C., Scheier, M. F., Miller, G. E., Schulz, R., & Carver, C. S. (2003b). Adaptative self-regulation of unattainable goals: Goal disengagement, goal reengagement, and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*, 1494-1508.

Zung, W. W. (1965). A self-rating depression scale. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 12*(1), 63-70.