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Accepted Article

Trait Activation in Commitment to Difficult Goals: The Role of Achievement Striving and Situational Cues

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This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/apps.12368

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Abstract

The current study utilized trait activation theory (TAT) (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett et al., 2013) to explain how the salience of goal-relevant performance-oriented social (i.e., manager's transformational leadership, peer performance norms) and organizational cues (i.e., reward expectancy) release or constrain employees' achievement striving (AS) personality trait and regulate the commitment to assigned difficult work goals. We also examined the effects of discretionary cues (signified by psychological empowerment) as trait activators. Hypotheses were tested using survey data collected from 297 managers employed in six large firms operating under a large Turkish family business group and using a common management-by-objectives system. In line with our predictions, when goals were perceived to be difficult, the associations between situational cues and goal commitment were inverse for employees with high vs. low AS. When goal difficulty was high, performance-oriented situational cues were generally positively related to goal commitment for employees with high AS, but the relationships were negative for those with low AS. The results also showed that, for commitment to difficult goals, psychological empowerment activated the expression of high and low AS in a similar manner. Overall, the findings challenge the prevailing universalistic approaches to goal motivation.

Keywords: trait activation, goal commitment, achievement motivation, goal difficulty

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Trait Activation in Commitment to Difficult Goals:

The Role of Achievement Striving and Situational Cues

Goal commitment can be described as "a volitional psychological bond" that indicates the degree to which people have "pledged themselves to a goal" (Klein, Cooper, & Monahan, 2013, p. 67). Individuals who are committed to their goals are likely to persist in their efforts over time to reach their goals and are unwilling to abandon or lower their goals (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987). Goal commitment is a central concept in goal setting theory as a requisite for high achieving goal performance (Locke & Latham, 1990).

The current study challenges the one-size-fits-all approach to work motivation, which assumes that assigning difficult goals and establishing a highly performance-oriented and autonomous work context universally boosts all employees' work motivation. In the following sections, we first discuss the incongruent predictions indicated by goal setting and expectancy theories regarding whether difficult goals boost or hinder goal commitment. We throw light on this debate by adopting a person-situation interactionist perspective and highlighting the role of personality differences in explaining the interpersonal variation in employees' commitment to assigned difficult work goals. In light of previous research findings on the antecedents of goal commitment, and the different motivational tendencies of individuals with high vs. low achievement striving (AS), we use trait activation theory (TAT, Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett, Simonet, Walser, & Brown, 2013) to explain how trait-relevant and performance-oriented situational cues interact with personality and lead to differing levels of commitment to difficult goals. We then explain and hypothesize how performance-oriented social (i.e., manager's transformational leadership, peer group performance norms), organizational (i.e., reward expectancy), and discretionary (i.e., psychological empowerment) cues activate AS in goal commitment.

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Commitment to Difficult Work Goals

Goal commitment is crucial to pursuing challenging goals since such goals require a great deal of effort and persistence to overcome potential setbacks (Hollenbeck and Klein, 1987; Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, & Alge, 1999; Seijts & Latham, 2011). Goal setting theory prescribes both goal difficulty and commitment to be high to ensure high performance, which would only be feasible if they are not negatively linked to each other. Alternatively, expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964)—which is the basis of Hollenbeck and Klein's (1987) widely adopted goal commitment framework—indicates that goal motivation is based on maximizing the product of two perceptions: The degree to which an individual believes that (1) presented challenges are possible to overcome (i.e., effort–performance expectancy) and (2) difficult goals are worth attaining by expending more effort (i.e., attractiveness or valence) (Vroom, 1964). Past research indicates that, within an assigned goal level, those who perceive the goal to be more difficult have lower expectancies to achieve it (Lee & Bobko, 1992; Martin, Snell & Callahan, 1999). In other words, according to expectancy theory, holding the perceived value of goal attainment constant, increasing goal difficulty should lower goal commitment. Hence, these two prevalent theoretical perspectives lead to inverse predictions about the goal difficulty and commitment relationship.

Past meta-analytical findings indicated negative but very small effect sizes (r_c = -.09 in Klein et al., 1999, and r_c = -.01 in Wofford, Goodwin, & Premack, 1999) for the relationship between assigned goal difficulty and commitment. Results also suggest a strong possibility of moderators, as indicated by the high levels of heterogeneity in effect sizes.[1] Yet, past studies on goal commitment merely enumerated the personal and situational factors that influence

[1] In Klein et al., 1999, chi-square test of heterogeneity for the difficulty of assigned goals was significant ($X^2(18, N = 2{,}424) = 157.61$, $p < .01$). Wofford reported the credibility interval for assigned goals as -.2 to + .2, which has a wide range (exceeding .11) and includes zero, which indicates a strong possibility of moderators (Geyskens, Krishnan, Steenkamp, & Cunha, 2009).

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the expectancy and/or value of goal attainment and did not look beyond the main effects (for a review see Klein et al., 2013).

In addressing this gap, we suggest that the two conflicting predictions about commitment to difficult goals can be explained by the regulating role of AS personality trait. Extant literature indicates that individual differences in achievement motivation may lead to different levels of expectancy and valence perceptions regarding goals—i.e., approach or promotion orientation, focused on success, vs. avoidance or prevention orientation, focused on not failing (Conroy, Elliot, & Thrash, 2009). These orientations also regulate the influence of expectancy×valence interactions on goal commitment, where having an approach orientation increases the interaction effect whereas avoidance orientation decreases it (Shah & Higgins, 1997). Thus, individuals' goal motivation tendencies largely determine how they react to difficult goals.

The Role of AS in Goal Difficulty-Goal Commitment Relationship

Employees' commitment to difficult work goals[2] is a product of the interactions between the person and the situation, which is a combination of individuals' unique motivational dispositions and the opportunities and constraints afforded by the situation (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). AS (a.k.a. need for achievement) is a trait that captures the individual differences in motivation to meet a high standard of excellence in a challenging task (Atkinson, 1957). AS is positively related both to the preference for difficult goals (Phillips & Gully, 1997; Yukl & Latham, 1978) and goal commitment (Bipp & Kleingeld, 2011; Klein et al., 1999). Yet, in past goal commitment studies utilizing expectancy theory,

[2] Goal difficulty can be operationalized either objectively (i.e., goal level) or subjectively. These two types of measurements are positively related to each other (Yukl & Latham, 1978; Mento, Cartledge, & Locke, 1980). In the present study, we focus on perceived goal difficulty, since it is more closely linked with goal commitment and, unlike objective measures, accounts for individual differences in task and contextual ability (Martin, Snell, & Callahan, 1999).

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AS was listed as just another factor that boosts the attractiveness of goal attainment (Klein et al., 2013).

AS is particularly critical in explaining the variation in goal-related attitudes and behaviors under high task and social demand conditions because high and low AS individuals' motivational responses are governed by completely different directives and frames of reference (Brunstein & Heckhausen, 2018). AS is driven by three different standards of excellence: Individual reference norms focus on comparisons with the person's past performance, social reference norms entail comparisons of performance outcomes with those of others, and objective reference norms entail evaluations using expectations or standards regarding the task itself (Buechner, Pekrun, & Lichtenfeld, 2018). High AS individuals tend to evaluate their own achievements using individual reference norms and experience more positive anticipatory emotions (i.e., hope for success or pride) (Brunstein & Heckhausen, 2018). Since they attribute their successes to their own efforts and failures to external causes (Weiner, 1974; Kukla, 1972), the pride they enjoy from successes is far greater than their fear of failure (Atkinson, 1957). Accordingly, they tend to exhibit a performance approach rather than an avoidance motive (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). When high AS individuals are subjected to social reference norms through the influence of authority figures, peer norms, and organizational reward mechanisms, they are likely to see the assignment of challenging tasks and ambitious goal standards as opportunities to improve and demonstrate their competence (McClelland, 1961).

In contrast to those with high AS, individuals with low AS tend to base their self-evaluations on social reference norms. They are driven by a desire to avoid failure (i.e., high performance avoidance orientation) and focus on preserving their self-esteem rather than improving their performance (Atkinson, 1957). They interpret failure as a sign of personal inadequacy, which they see as shameful and demoralizing (Heckhausen, 1975; McGregor &

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Elliot, 2005). Hence, they respond negatively to difficult goals, especially when they perceive high levels of evaluative pressure in the social and organizational context (Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005). When low AS individuals are overwhelmed by the threat of social embarrassment, deliberately choosing not to commit from the start can serve as a way of preserving their self-esteem and avoiding negative emotional states. This leads them to prefer easy tasks and show a lack of persistence in more difficult ones, especially when they are placed under the spotlight (Brunstein & Heckhausen, 2018).

Empirical findings from previous studies confirm that those who are high in AS prefer difficult tasks over easy ones (Yukl & Latham, 1978) and are more committed to their work goals (Hollenbeck et al., 1989; Klein et al., 1999). Compared to those with low AS, individuals with high AS experience higher levels of intrinsic motivation in response to assigned performance goals (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993) and higher level of positive affect and well-being when striving for approach goals (Job, Langens, & Brandstätter, 2009). Hence, we posit that, in the face of high task demands caused by difficult assigned goals, high AS individuals are likely to commit more strongly, especially if they anticipate that their achievement will lead to valued intrinsic (e.g., a sense of accomplishment) and/or extrinsic (e.g., recognition) outcomes.

A host of experimental studies conducted by Harackiewicz and colleagues examined the regulatory motivational differences between high vs. low AS individuals and provided ample support for the aforementioned divergent motivational mechanisms (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2002; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 1999). They found that AS moderated the effects of performance goals on intrinsic motivation such that low AS individuals spent less time on and experienced less enjoyment than those with high AS (Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993). Low AS individuals suffered from decreased intrinsic motivation as a result of the disruption of task involvement

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due to the assignment of external standards of excellence (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994). A competitive context increased perceived challenge, positive affect, and eagerness for high AS, but lowered these outcomes for low AS individuals (Tauer & Harackiewicz, 1999). In a performance evaluative context, the task interest of individuals with low AS was determined by whether they felt pressured during the activity whereas those with high AS were more focused on their performance outcomes (Senko & Harackiewicz, 2002). Durik and Harackiewicz (2003) found that high AS participants had the highest level of enjoyment and task involvement when they were given performance target goals that were explicitly linked to over-arching performance purpose goals. Conversely, low AS participants' motivation suffered when the performance purpose goals were too salient. Most relevantly, Senko & Harackiewicz's (2005) study showed that, when individuals perceived their assigned performance goals as difficult, those with low AS felt more pressure and had lower levels of perceived competence, which resulted in enjoying the task less compared to those with high AS, even when they received the same positive performance feedback. This suggests that when task demands are high, individuals with low AS interpret and react to the same situational cues (even seemingly positive ones) more negatively than those with high AS.

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, in the next section we explain how the situational activation mechanisms of TAT can be applied to explain how these personal inclinations bring about disparate motivational outcomes for employees with high vs. low AS.

Activation of the AS Trait in Goal Settings

According to TAT, a personality trait is activated if the context provides trait-relevant cues to an individual, which are categorized with respect to the types of trait-relevant functional situational features that they indicate—namely *demands*, *distracters*, *constraints*, *releasers,* and *facilitators* (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Work demands are cues that can activate

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traits and lead to the display of desirable work behaviors that enhance job performance. Conversely, distracters are cues that, if acted upon, can hinder job performance. Constraints deactivate certain traits and diminish their exhibition in work behaviors whereas releasers counteract the effects of constraints and unleash the behavioral tendencies indicated by the traits. Lastly, facilitators are those that enhance the salience and influence of other existent trait-relevant cues. More recently, Tett and his colleagues (2013) have identified *discretionary* cues as situational trait activators that are typically found in autonomous work situations.

Trait activation is particularly relevant to the process of goal motivation. The specifics of a situation and individuals' existing motivational tendencies jointly activate individuals' goal intentions (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). The Rubicon model of action (Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987) suggests that goal striving begins with a predecisional deliberation on the expectancies and valences of goals based on individuals' subjective personal preferences; then proceeds to intention formation, signifying the transformation of motivational tendencies to volition. This volitional process ultimately leads to goal-directed action and goal performance.

Recently, Tett, Toich, and Ozkum (2021) indicated that TAT can be utilized to explain the motivational mechanisms behind why and how goal related dispositions are engaged, such as preferences for difficult goals or approach vs. avoidance orientations. They suggested that "understanding what activates, constrains, releases, and facilitates relevant dispositions and the levels at which such factors operate (task, group, organization) advances understanding of within-person variability in work motivation through a self-regulation lens" (p. 222). As an example, they pointed out that high AS individuals prefer and try harder to reach difficult goals (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993). According to TAT, the perceived difficulty of assigned goals indicates a task demand that sets the standard for satisfactory

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performance. Individuals respond to this demand according to their general preferences for goal difficulty determined by their AS.

TAT also categorizes situational cues based on their source or level of operation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Task-level cues pertain to the job itself, including the day-to-day tasks. Social-level cues are those that arise from interactions with others, which include behaviors and expectations of peers and managers. Organization-level cues are macro characteristics such as culture, structures, policies, rewards systems, etc. We utilize these levels in our model (presented in Figure 1) to capture the complexity in real situations by examining the combined influence of multiple cues from multiple levels on individuals' expression of their AS personality.

Locke, Latham, and Erez (1988) identified three main categories of contextual factors that precede goal commitment: Authority (i.e., the experimenter in a lab or the supervisor in an organization), peer group influence, and external rewards/incentives. In the current study, we represent each group of factors using variables that are shown in the existing goal motivation literature as those that are most proximal to goal commitment (Klein et al., 1999) and have the highest potential to activate AS personality trait by maximizing the normative and evaluative pressures to perform. For example, in organizational contexts, supportiveness (Locke et al., 1988) and leadership (Klein et al., 2013) of the supervisor were identified as the main authority influences on goal commitment. While there may be many different types of leadership styles that can influence goal commitment, in this study we focus on the supervisor's TL behaviors, which boost both individual and collective performance norms. Leaders with high TL emphasize the collective purpose underlying the work goals, impose very high performance expectations, and demand all employees "to perform above and beyond the call of duty" (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991, p. 364), which altogether bring about a context that maximizes the salience and impact of goal achievement. As suggested by

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Locke et al. (1988), the social influence of peers is another important source of normative feedback as well as an indicator of the degree of workgroup competition. Lastly, organizations' attempts to maintain high performance standards are reflected directly by their established reward systems. Hence, these variables were included in our hypothesized model (as depicted in Figure 1) to signify employees' perceptions of their performance-oriented psychosocial contexts.

In the current study, we argue that a difficult goal constitutes a trait concordant task demand that a high AS employee would see as an opportunity to succeed and feel pride, which is activated by the increased emphasis on performance-oriented situational cues. Conversely, for low AS employees, a misfit between their achievement preferences and the prevalence of normative performance cues in the work context is expected to prompt a threat appraisal, triggering an avoidance response that hinders goal commitment. In the remainder of this section, we describe specifically how each situational cue is expected to release or constrain the expression of these innate tendencies for those with high vs. low AS.

Transformational Leadership (TL)

Transformational leaders are those who motivate employees to embrace a set of common goals that transcend their self-interests for the good of the group, through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999). Apart from being the most well-studied in leadership literature (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), this leadership style is also particularly important for enhancing employees' goal commitment both at the individual (DeArmond, Bass, Cigularov, Chen, & Moore, 2018; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006) and group levels (Chai, Hwang, & Joo, 2017; Liu & Li, 2018). From an expectancy-value framework perspective, TL can enhance commitment to a difficult goal in two ways. First, articulation of an appealing vision for the group increases the attractiveness of goal attainment. A challenging goal assigned by a high TL manager can

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be perceived as more important or valuable because TL generally leads to more positive social exchange relationships and feelings of reciprocity (Herman, Huang, & Lam, 2013). Secondly, TL can enhance the expectancy of goal attainment by encouraging subordinates to adopt high standards of performance and provide them with the intellectual stimulation necessary to solve problems during goal attainment by using new and creative ways. Indeed, a recent study showed that TL shapes employees' goal attitudes and behaviors by enhancing both goal importance (i.e., attractiveness) and attainability (i.e., expectancy) (Steinmann, Klug, & Maier, 2018).

TL behaviors are more critical for employees' work attitudes when assigned goals are perceived to be difficult (Whittington, Goodwin, & Murray, 2004). When high AS employees are challenged by difficult work goals, they would expect their manager to explain the importance of such goals for the organization's vision and strategic goals and intellectually challenge and inspire them to find ways to reach such goals. Hence, we argue that high AS employees' tendencies to exert effort would be released in the presence of high levels of TL. Conversely, managers' deficiency in providing effective leadership to meet high work demands may act as a constraint on the expression of high AS.

In contrast to employees with high AS, we expect the supervisor's high TL to act as a releaser for low AS employees' avoidance tendencies and diminish their intention to show effort toward difficult goals. While most of the literature on TL has focused on its performance-enhancing effects, some studies have indicated that TL may also have disparate effects on individuals depending on their needs and motives. For example, TL drives followers to adopt more promotion-focused goal-pursuit strategies, which poses a regulatory misfit and therefore leads to decreased task effort for prevention-focused low AS employees (Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2014). TL was also shown to increase emotional strain for employees who have low levels of ambition (Holstad, Korek, Rigotti, &

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Mohr, 2014) and to decrease thriving at work for those with high levels of emotional exhaustion (Niessen, Mader, Stride, & Jimmieson, 2017). This may be because low AS employees respond to the demands made by TL managers with a "threat state" (as opposed to a "challenge" state), which is a result of the perception that the resources available to them outweigh task demands (Sassenberg & Scholl, 2019). This potential threat becomes exceedingly conspicuous as low AS employees pick up on their managers' attempts to instill "pride" in their collective performance, engendering feelings of normative pressure "because it makes one's self-worth fragile and contingent upon success", and ultimately "begets undesirable outcomes" (Senko & Tropiano, 2016, p. 12).

Overall, we expect that having a manager high in TL will release high AS employees' natural preference for being challenged and result in the highest level of commitment to difficult goals. Conversely, high TL will increase the normative emphasis on performance and thereby act as a releaser for low AS employees' performance anxieties, which will ultimately hinder their goal motivation. Therefore, we expect that goal commitment will be lowest when employees with low AS perceive that both goal difficulty and TL are high.

Hypothesis 1: There is a three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and manager's TL on goal commitment. Specifically, when goal difficulty is high, TL is positively related to goal commitment for high AS and negatively related to goal commitment for low AS employees.

Perceived Peer Group Performance Norms

Past research on goal commitment indicates that employees' perceptions regarding their peers' approach to work goals serve as a situational antecedent that enhances the expectancy of goal attainment (Klein et al., 2013). Peers socially influence employees' beliefs by becoming role models in setting challenging goals, striving for them, and pushing the level of standards for satisfactory performance higher. Peer group performance norms can also

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increase the extrinsic value of goal attainment by creating performance competition and increasing the potential for recognition as well as social rejection among peers. However, the impact of such social normative pressures to perform is not likely to be uniform across individuals and contexts. Being in a competitive group and the availability of information on how others perform were found to boost intrinsic motivation for high AS individuals, but decrease motivation for those with low AS (Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992). High AS individuals enjoy the competition for its own sake, and even in the absence of positive feedback or when they are given negative feedback (Tauer and Harackiewicz, 1999). Therefore, the existence of a difficult goal alongside high performance norms is likely to provide a favorable situational context for high AS individuals and acts as a trait releaser. Conversely, high AS employees may feel constrained by the lack of a peer group environment that provides social value for their commitment, effort, and achievements.

On the other hand, for employees with low levels of AS, the presence of high levels of peer group performance norms in a difficult goal context is likely to have detrimental effects on their goal motivation. Low AS people react negatively to challenges especially when faced with situations that involve evaluative or competitive pressures and social comparisons (Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992). Furthermore, the availability of information and feedback regarding performance magnifies the gap between those with low and high AS (Tauer & Harackiewicz, 1999). Hence, for low AS employees, increased social normative pressures to achieve difficult goals will release the nonfunctional aspects of their personality traits by exasperating their performance anxieties and decreasing their goal commitment. Accordingly, we expect to find the lowest levels of goal commitment when low AS individuals perceive difficult goals in a peer group context with high performance norms.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and perceived peer group norms on goal commitment. Specifically, when goal difficulty is

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high, group norms are positively related to goal commitment for high AS and negatively related to goal commitment for low AS employees.

Reward Expectancy

Reward expectancy refers to the perceived probability that valued rewards will follow high performance in a task. Hollenbeck and Klein's (1987) expectancy model of goal commitment suggests that the use of clear, tangible rewards boosts the overall attractiveness of goal attainment. Since these types of systems are typically established by and implemented throughout the organization, such extrinsic rewards can be categorized as an organization-level situational cue (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Employees can expect to receive both tangible (i.e., increase in pay, the likelihood of promotion, and job security) and intangible (i.e., recognition) outcomes based on their goal performance.

High AS employees actively seek opportunities to demonstrate their competence and are likely to seek long-term success by advancing their careers within their organizations. Indeed, Tett and Burnett (2003) identified limited promotion opportunities as a type of constraint for conscientiousness. Lack of organizational rewards for high performance impedes the activation of trait tendencies for high AS employees, as they are not likely to find enough value in spending their effort toward the accomplishment of difficult performance goals. Conversely, the existence of organization-wide performance rewards will act as a releaser. The greatest levels of goal commitment are possible when difficult goals are assigned to high AS individuals and rewards are tightly tied to their achievement. This is because such individuals are most likely to be motivated to take on the challenge of pursuing difficult goals when they can reap organizational benefits in the form of extrinsic rewards.

Those with low AS do not like to focus on performance outcomes and lose their task interest when performance goals are assigned in an evaluative context (Senko & Harackiewicz, 2002). Knowing that failure to reach assigned difficult goals may have

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significant ramifications—such as lower pay and missed career opportunities—creates a high-pressure goal context that can trigger a threat perception. Hence, the lowest levels of goal commitment will be observed when low AS employees perceive high goal difficulty and high reward expectancy. In contrast, when rewards are not tied to goal accomplishment, these employees are likely to perceive a difficult goal as a challenge to surmount rather than a threat to their self-esteem.

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and reward expectancy on goal commitment. Specifically, when goal difficulty is high, reward expectancy is positively related to goal commitment for high AS and negatively related to goal commitment for low AS employees.

Psychological Empowerment

Menon (1999) defined psychological empowerment as "a cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence, and goal internalization" (p. 161), which are typically products of initiatives taken in an organization to grant autonomy and control to individual employees regarding the work for which they are responsible (Menon, 2001). In the current study, we examine psychological empowerment as a state that points to the perceived prevalence of discretionary cues in the work context. TAT describes discretionary cues that are seen in weak, autonomous work contexts as "pure" trait activators in that they yield intrinsic rewards when triggered and acted on. While discretionary cues are related to autonomy and weak situations, their trait-specific nature distinguishes them from these more generalized features. Thus, being psychologically empowered toward one's assigned work goals is a subjective perceptual outcome of an autonomy-supportive work context (Gagne & Deci, 2005) that is rich in discretionary cues.

We argue that psychological empowerment is a trait-relevant activator of employees' AS tendencies in goal motivation contexts. Individuals with high AS have an increased

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intrinsic desire to develop and exhibit high levels of skill in their work (McClelland, 1961) and this desire is likely to trigger increased goal motivation when those goals afford high levels of competence. High AS individuals show a greater ability to regulate their behavior autonomously (McClelland, 1961) and have a greater desire to control the events in their lives. Consequently, those with high AS motives prefer entrepreneurial careers more and achieve greater success in occupations and organizational contexts that allow them to have autonomy in their work (Collins, Hanges, & Locke, 2004; Stewart & Roth, 2007). Employees with high AS experience greater increases in intrinsic motivation in response to their managers' and organizations' attempts to increase the meaning and complexity of their jobs by providing them with more task variety, identity, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Accordingly, employees' overall psychological empowerment was found to be positively linked to their achievement needs (Hon & Rensvold, 2006). Furthermore, high AS employees perceived higher levels of self-determination in response to empowering practices such as allowing participation in goal setting (Hon & Rensvold, 2006). These findings suggest that high AS individuals are particularly responsive to the positive influence of empowering practices, which act as trait-relevant discretionary cues that enhance their intrinsic motivation.

Conversely, high levels of perceived control in an empowered work context may trigger adverse effects for those with low AS since their dominant drive is to avoid failure and negative emotions. For such individuals, high levels of fear of failure posed by difficult goals can only be negated if they are ultimately not in control of the situation and can attribute potential failure to others. When they are following orders, they do not need to worry as much about their performance outcomes, and may be better able to focus on the intrinsic enjoyment of the task itself. Indeed, Durik and Harackiewicz (2003) showed that low AS individuals expressed more task enjoyment when they received targets with step-by-step

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instructions. Since those with low AS also have low promotion focus, they tend to construe power and control as a responsibility rather than an opportunity (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012), especially when the likelihood of success is low.

Past empirical studies support that increased empowerment can trigger different responses in employees with high vs. low AS. Hui, Lee, and Niu (2010) found that, among employees who prefer to handle multiple tasks simultaneously (i.e., polychronic), empowering employees by increasing task variety boosts organization-based self-esteem of high AS employees but lowers it for those with low AS. A similar effect was found for another personality trait—desire for control (DFC)—that is highly and positively correlated with AS (Burger, 1985). DFC was shown to moderate the relationships between job demands, control, and perceived goal attainment (Parker, Jimmieson, & Amiot, 2009). Specifically, when task demands were high, those low in DFC experienced stress-exacerbating effects of high control and stress-buffering effects of low control on goal attainment. Conversely, under high demand conditions, high control was stress-buffering and low control was stress-exacerbating for those with a high DFC.

In line with these findings, we expect psychological empowerment to trigger a positive influence on goal commitment for high AS and a negative influence for low AS individuals when perceived goal difficulty is high.

Hypothesis 4: There is a positive three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and psychological empowerment on goal commitment. Specifically, when goal difficulty is high, empowerment is positively related to goal commitment for high AS and negatively related to goal commitment for low AS employees.

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Method

Participants and Procedures

We collected data from six large firms, all part of a very large Turkish business group. Five of these firms were partly public. Four of the companies were in manufacturing (i.e., electrical, electronics, and automotive) and two were in service (i.e., gas distribution and mass-market retail) sectors. Their number of employees ranged from 1,000 to 15,000. Although the six firms were independently managed, they all used a common management-by-objectives (MBO) system designed by a centralized HR function in the headquarters of the business group.

Data collection was conducted via an online survey right after the annual goal setting procedures were completed in all six firms. We sent online invitations to participate in the study to the email addresses of all managers (496 managers in total) together with a letter of support from the HR director of the parent company. Responses were received from a total of 297 managers from a wide array of business functions, resulting in a response rate of 59.9%.

Since the questionnaires inquired about potentially sensitive issues—such as opinions about their goals and immediate managers—full respondent anonymity was maintained and no demographic data were collected. Only 11% of the target population was female at the time of data collection. The average age of the population was 41 years.

Measures

All scales used (except the one measuring peer group norms about work goals, which was generated by the researchers) were translated from English to Turkish by an individual fluent in both languages. These translations were then reviewed by two other individuals who were also fluent in both languages using a collaborative and iterative approach (Douglas & Craig, 2007).

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In the utilized MBO system, employee goals were categorized into three standard headings much like a balanced scorecard system: *finance*, *customer*, and *process goals*. Each goal had a specific weight reflecting its relative importance among individuals' own set of goals. We asked participants to indicate the goal that had the highest weight in each category and rate the difficulty and their commitment to each goal. Hence, the resulting dataset consisted of up to three repeated goal difficulty and commitment measurements.

Goal commitment. Commitment to annual work goals was measured using the five items developed by Klein et al. (2001) using a six-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*). A sample item is: "I am strongly committed to pursuing this goal."

Achievement striving (AS). This personality trait was measured with eight items from the standardized Turkish version (Gulgoz, 2002) of NEO PI-R, developed by Costa and McCrae (1992) as a sub-dimension of the conscientiousness trait (1 = *completely false* to 5 = *completely true*). A sample item is: "I work hard to accomplish my goals".

Perceived goal difficulty. The degree of difficulty of all three categories of goals (process, customer, and finance) was measured using three items from the goal difficulty dimension of a measure of task-goal attributes (Steers, 1976) with a six-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*). Participants rated their level of commitment and the degree of difficulty of their goals by evaluating their highest weighted work goals in each goal category for that year. A sample item is: "This work goal is quite difficult to attain."

Participants rated their level of commitment and the degree of difficulty of their goals by evaluating their highest weighted work goals in each pre-determined goal category for that year. They were first asked to indicate whether they had received a goal of each type for the current year. If they indicated that they did have a goal of that type, they were asked to write down the specific content of the goal with the highest weight. Then, they were asked to

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evaluate the goal difficulty and their goal commitments for each goal they noted. Thus, participants reported up to three goal commitment and goal difficulty scores.

Transformational leadership (TL). The standardized Turkish version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-Form 5X; Avolio et al., 1999) was used in the present study. The measure consisted of 20 items covering four dimensions: idealized influence, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation. The items asked participants to rate their immediate managers on a five-point frequency scale (1 = *almost never* to 5 = *frequently, if not always*).

Perceived peer group norms. A measure of peer social influence (developed based on Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987) reflecting the employees' perceptions of peer group norms on goal-related performance was used. The measure uses a six-point scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*) and consists of the following four items: "My peers believe that they should exert the necessary effort to achieve their assigned work goals"; "My peers believe that they can achieve their assigned work goals if they try hard enough"; "My peers believe in the importance of their assigned work goals"; "Those among my peers who do not exert enough effort to achieve their assigned work goals are not received favorably."

Reward expectancy. Reward expectancy was measured using four items from the Performance → Reward Expectancy section of the Work-Related Expectancies Scale (Sims, Szilagyi, & McKemey, 1976) modified to fit the goal context. Three tangible (e.g., "succeeding on my work goals increases my chances for promotion") and one intangible reward ("succeeding on my work goals leads to increased recognition from my manager") were measured. A six-point response scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*) was used.

Psychological empowerment. Menon's (2001) nine-item psychological empowerment scale was adapted to goal context. The measure consisted of three dimensions, perceived

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control, goal internalization, and perceived competence, with three items in each. Six items from perceived control and perceived competence dimensions were reworded to fit the goal setting and attainment context. The original items in the goal internalization scale were used since they already pertained to goals. A sample item for perceived control is as follows: "I have the authority to make decisions about how to reach my goals." The items were rated using a six-point Likert-type (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *completely agree*) response format.

Results

Factor Analysis

To test the construct validity of the measures we used, we ran a set of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). All study variables were examined together in one two-level CFA model using Mplus. The repeated measurements of goal difficulty and goal commitment were modeled at the within-level and the remaining study variables were modeled at the between-level. A model with second-order latent constructs formed with sub-dimensions[3] was compared against an alternative measurement model with all items directly tied to first-order constructs. The former model showed a statistically better fit[4] to the data ($\Delta\chi^2_{(7)} = 182.47$, $p \leq .01$). The second-order latent theorized structure had overall good model fit ($\chi^2_{(983)} = 1758.22$, $p \leq .01$; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .03; $SRMR_{within} = .06$; $SRMR_{between} = .06$). All item loadings were statistically significant ($p < .01$) and standardized item loadings ranged between .47 and 1.00.

[3] Second order measurement models at the between level comprised three dimensions of psychological empowerment and four dimensions of TL.

[4] Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test was conducted for model comparison due to MLR estimator used for the multi-level CFA.

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Analysis of Common Method Variance (CMV)

Since the current study was cross-sectional and used self-report measures from a single source, a set of analyses was conducted to assess whether CMV poses a problem for the relationships. Recent developments in research methodology suggest that using the CFA marker technique is advised in cases where the source of method bias is unknown (Williams, Hartman & Cavazotte, 2010). In this study, we used a measure of trust in subordinates (Cook & Wall, 1980) (since all participants in the study were managers) as a marker variable. Results of the model comparisons indicated that, while CMV existed in the data, its influence was not large enough to change the linear relationships between study variables significantly.[5]

Hypotheses Testing

Since goal commitment and goal difficulty were rated separately and nested within each participant, we conducted a mixed-effects multilevel regression analysis using SPSS. In the first model (presented in Table 1 Model 1) only the main effects of the between-persons study variables (i.e., AS, TL, group norms, reward expectancy, and psychological empowerment) as well as within-person variation in the repeated measurements of goal commitment and goal difficulty were included.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) indicated a three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and manager's TL on goal commitment. The three-way interaction term between goal difficulty, AS and TL (Model 2) had a significant positive coefficient [$B = .14$, $t(1, 699.45) = 2.71$, $p \leq .01$]. To explore the nature of this significant three-way interaction effect we conducted simple slope tests (using the HLM 3-way interaction tool by Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) and plotted the relationships between TL and goal commitment at one standard

[5] The results of this analysis are presented in Appendix A.

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deviation below and above the means of goal difficulty and AS. The tests of conditional slopes (Figure 2a) at high levels of goal difficulty were significant for both high and low AS [for high AS: $B = .25$, $t(1, 739) = 2.54$, $p \leq .01$; for low AS: $B = -.28$, $t(1, 739) = 2.76$, $p \leq .01$]. Analyzing the regions of significance through the Johnson-Neyman technique (Johnson, & Neyman, 1936) showed that the AS×TL interactions were significantly positive at AS values above 4.94 (7.4% of the sample) and negative for values below 3.79 (15.5% of the sample). These provided support for our hypothesis that, for high AS employees who perceive their goals as difficult, TL had a significant positive relationship with goal commitment. Conversely, for low AS employees who perceive high goal difficulty, the TL-goal commitment relationship was significantly negative. Therefore, results showed support for H1.

Results indicated that (Model 3 in Table 2) the three-way interaction between goal difficulty, AS and peer group norms was significant [$B = .14$, $t(1, 740.21) = 2.66$, $p \leq .01$]. The tests of conditional slopes (plotted in Figure 3a) at high levels of goal difficulty were significant for both high [$B = .43$, $t(1, 776) = 4.10$, $p \leq .01$] and low AS employees [$B = -.33$, $t(1, 773) = 3.18$, $p \leq .01$]. Regions of significance indicated positive effects for AS values above 4.47 (38.7% of the sample) and negative effects for AS values below 3.82 (15.5% of the sample). Hence, the findings were line with our predictions in H2.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) posited to find a three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and reward expectancy on goal commitment. Results (Model 4) indicated once again that the three-way interaction was significant [$B = .14$, $t(1, 660.44) = 2.49$, $p \leq .05$]. Figure 4a shows that for high goal difficulty reward expectancy goal commitment relationship was negative and significant for low AS [$B = -.21$, $t(1, 690) = 2.67$, $p \leq .01$], and positive but not significant for high AS employees [$B = .13$, $t(1, 690) = 1.67$, n.s.]. When goal difficulty was high, reward expectancy was negatively related to goal commitment for AS values below

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3.95 (20.9% of the sample). Therefore, findings provided support for H3 for low AS employees, but not for those with high AS.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) suggested a three-way interaction between AS, goal difficulty, and psychological empowerment on goal commitment. As shown in Model 5, this interaction term was significant [B = .28, t(1, 748.52) = 3.27, $p \leq .01$]. Figure 5a shows that, when goal difficulty was high, the relationship between empowerment and goal commitment was significant and positive [B = .71, t(1, 763) = 4.50, $p \leq .01$] at AS values above 4.31 (50.2% of the sample) and negative [B = -.39, t(1, 763) = -2.69, $p \leq .01$] at those below 3.59 (6.1% of the sample). Thus, H4 was supported by the results.

A posthoc investigation of the same regression analyses was conducted by including the firm dummy variables as fixed factors to control for the influence of firm differences (N = 6) on the study findings. A comparison of these results against the original ones showed that none of the main or interactive effect coefficients was significantly influenced by the inclusion of fixed firm effects, suggesting that the findings held true across the firms in our sample.

Discussion

Utilizing TAT (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett et al., 2013), we posited that the presence of goal-relevant and performance-oriented situational cues in the social and organizational context—such as TL, peer performance norms, reward expectancies—act as releasers of the AS trait, which influence employees' motivation to show persistent effort toward reaching their work goals. We also purported that these situational cues would trigger different attitudinal responses for high AS and low AS employees when task demands were high. Specifically, when perceived goal difficulty was high we expected performance-oriented social and organizational cues to be associated with goal commitment positively for those with high AS and negatively for those with low AS. The results were mostly in line with our

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predictions. When goal difficulty was high, high AS employees' goal commitment was positively related to the salience of performance-oriented situational cues (except for reward expectancy), indicating that such cues acted as releasers for their goal motivation. Meanwhile, low AS employees' goal commitment suffered significantly when they perceived an increased emphasis on performance through all three types of situational cues. This suggests that, in high work demand contexts, the presence of high levels of performance-oriented normative pressures unleashes low AS employees' dormant performance anxieties. Overall, these findings provide strong evidence that AS trait is activated through situational cues in response to increased work demands.

The study also tested TAT's premise that discretionary cues act as trait activators by measuring employees' level of goal-related psychological empowerment. Empowerment was positively related to the commitment to difficult goals for high AS employees whereas the relationship was negative for low AS employees. Hence, discretionary cues activated employees' inherent AS tendencies when task demands were high. When high AS employees were free to choose how to go about accomplishing their goals, such autonomy cues pointed to intrinsic value (i.e., potential sense of accomplishment) and activated their trait tendencies (Tett et al., 2013).

We also examined the regions of significance of the results to understand distributional differences of the sample across situational moderators. For all three situational moderators of AS, the proportions of the sample with negative slopes were similar (15.5% for TL and peer performance norms, 20.9% for reward expectancies), except for psychological empowerment (6.1%). This suggests that, for low AS employees, performance-oriented releasers showed stronger activation of negative effects than discretionary cues, as these cues are more likely to reflect the social normative pressures to perform. Conversely, there were larger variations in the size of the positively sloped regions for those with high AS.

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Psychological empowerment and group norms had rather large proportions of positive effect (50.2% and 38.7%, respectively), whereas TL had a much smaller proportion (7.7%), and reward expectancy had no region of significance for positive effects. Hence, for employees with high AS, empowerment and group norms were the strongest trait activators, followed by TL. On the other hand, reward expectancies did not activate high AS employees' goal motivation.

These results suggest that, when challenging goals are assigned, high AS employees are most committed to their work goals when they perceive that their work context emits strong discretionary cues in the form of empowerment, their peers value high performance, or their managers are intellectually stimulating and inspiring, but not so much when they perceive that tangible or intangible rewards are tied closely with goal performance. The generally weaker effect of reward expectancy as a releaser of high AS may be because organization-level cues are more distal to employees' goal commitment than social or discretionary cues. Furthermore, according to the self-determination continuum suggested by self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), tangible rewards indicate an external regulation (i.e., controlled motivation) and expectations from others such as managers and peers engender an introjected motivation (i.e., moderately controlled motivation). Since high AS people have a predominantly autonomous goal regulation (McClelland, 1961), an environment that at the very least provides an introjected motivation might be needed for the activation of high AS. Likewise, psychological empowerment leads to a more intrinsic type of motivation (i.e., identified regulation), which is highly compatible with high AS individuals' inner drive to enhance and prove their competence.

It is important to note that assigning difficult goals was not, in and of itself, demotivating for low AS employees, since their levels of goal commitment were comparable to (even sometimes higher than) high AS employees when social and organizational cues did

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not place a heavy emphasis on performance. This provides support for the motivating potential of setting difficult goals, as championed by goal setting theory. What hinders the motivation of these employees is being in a context with abundant normative pressures that enhance the salience of social comparisons based on performance outcomes. In the absence of these cues, low AS individuals can see difficult goals as developmental opportunities (i.e., mastery goals) rather than performance pressures (Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005) and enjoy the challenge of the task itself without focusing on the ramifications of failure (Durik & Harackiewicz, 2003).

The current study contributes to two separate lines of literature. First, it addresses the need to investigate the boundary conditions of goal commitment posed by personal and situational factors in the pursuit of difficult goals (Klein et al., 2013). Our findings shed light on the reasons behind previous theoretical and empirical ambiguities in the relationship between goal difficulty and commitment and highlight the need to take a more nuanced look at the influence of situational factors on goal commitment. Specifically, our results show that AS is an important regulator in employees' commitment to assigned difficult goals. From an expectancy theory lens, our results suggest that low expectancies due to highly difficult goals do not hinder effort for high AS individuals since they tend to see task demands as personal challenges and opportunities to prove their competence. However, low expectancies are problematic for individuals with low AS when the social and organizational context emphasizes high performance standards. The fact that low and high AS employees responded so differently to difficult goals under evaluative pressures indicates that individual differences in AS should be taken into account when designing goal-setting interventions and testing expectancy theory predictions.

Second, our study presents an expansion of TAT's criterion space to a cognitive-motivational construct, goal commitment, and provides a comprehensive test of its

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propositions about situational cues that facilitate trait activation, including its most recent theoretical developments regarding discretionary cues (Tett et al., 2013). Although TAT has been increasingly used in the literature, Tett and colleagues (2013) pointed out that most citations were indirect and even direct tests of the theory did not focus on more than one situational cue at once. We applied TAT constructs to explain individual differences in attitudes in goal contexts and tested the role of five situational cues from different levels and sources. The fact that all hypothesized three-way interactions were significant provides strong support for TAT.

Our results also contribute to the goal commitment literature through the use of a field research design, which resolves the issue of low levels of ecological validity of laboratory settings used in typical goal motivation studies (Klein & Kim, 1998) and facilitates the examination of real-life performance goals that have tangible consequences for employees' careers. Existing field studies on goal commitment usually focused on a single variable at a time (e.g., Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). The field setting provided a richer and more realistic depiction of the social and organizational antecedents of goal commitment.

The results underline the importance of providing a trait-concordant organizational context during goal setting and attainment processes by catering to the specific needs of individuals instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. High AS employees are better able to cope with increased work demands and respond well to heightened performance expectations from peers or managers as well as to organizational efforts to empower them. On the other hand, their goal motivation suffers when they don't feel empowered to achieve challenging goals. Hence, it is advisable for highly competitive organizations to recruit and select employees who have high levels of AS and implement employee empowerment practices that cater to their high achievement needs.

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Not surprisingly, not all employees can be high in AS. Even in our sample of highly accomplished professional managers, there was significant variation in AS tendencies. Hence, organizations should not assume that all employees, even managers, are highly achievement driven and would benefit from being pressured to achieve high performance goals. Our results clearly suggest that low AS employees are prone to perceive a threat when difficult assigned goals are reinforced with seemingly positive leadership, social norms, and reward systems. This is especially troubling since most corporate performance management systems assign challenging annual performance goals to employees, train leaders to push their subordinates to their limits, increase the competition between peers by rating their performance on a curve or using quotas, tie annual bonuses or pay raises to performance, and try to give them autonomy while accomplishing their goals. Durik and Harackiewicz (2003) show that low AS employees are better able to engage with the tasks when they are given mastery goals (which focus on self-referenced skill development over time) or lower-level performance goals that provide them with specific steps without making the competitive purposes underlying those goals too salient. Hence, to ensure that low AS employees can focus on their tasks and keep their performance anxieties at bay, managers can assign them mastery goals and continuously monitor and provide some direction, without overly emphasizing high standards and comparing their performance levels to others.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In the current study, we modeled the relationships between the variables based on extant literature; however, due to the cross-sectional nature of the design, our results do not allow us to make inferences about the direction of causality. For example, while our model considers the difficulty of assigned goals as an antecedent of goal commitment, it may be possible that past commitment to goals elevates employees' perceptions of both themselves and the situational factors. Despite this shortcoming, collecting data on a single occasion

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(immediately after annual goals were set) was also beneficial in ensuring that each measure referred to the same subjective experience and that the relationships among the measures were not affected by recall errors or changes in the perceived environment or person. It also eliminated the problem of reduced response rates seen in longitudinal designs (Kulik, 2011) and allowed us to assure participants of full anonymity.

Our use of individual-level self-report measurements is also a significant methodological limitation; but it is in line with the subjective nature of the phenomena we examined (Crampton & Wagner, 1994), given our focus on the psychological processes by which employee perceptions of situational factors relate to their motivational states. The validity of findings from single-source and cross-sectional designs are usually scrutinized due to the possible biasing effects of CMV; however, we do not expect this to be a significant threat for this study given that all our hypotheses involve complex interactive relationships. Indeed, it has been shown that the existence of CMV causes a conservative test of interaction hypotheses since it deflates non-linear relationships (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). Furthermore, our posthoc marker CFA analysis showed that the relationships between study variables were not significantly influenced by CMV.

The fact that we were not able to collect demographic information is another limitation. However, there is no conceptual reason to expect such variables need to be controlled in goal commitment studies (Klein et al., 2013). Indeed, findings from previous studies on goal commitment (Wofford, et al. 1992) suggest that doing so would not have changed our results. On the other hand, not collecting demographic data allowed us to ensure full anonymity, which alleviates CMV problems in self-report data (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We collected data from managers working in six independent firms within a single Turkish business group. The business group's adoption of the same MBO system across its firms provided a chance to test our hypotheses with employees working in different sectors

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but under a uniform system. Posthoc tests revealed that accounting for fixed firm effects did not change our results. Still, our findings may be bound by the performance management system utilized as well as the types of employees (i.e., managers) that participated in this study. Results may not generalize to employees in other work contexts, such as those who have large discretion in setting their own goals (e.g., self-managed teams) or work alone (e.g., telecommute). Conducting more research to test trait activation in different organizational contexts would be valuable.

The common business group ownership and the uniformity of the goal-setting system utilized across the firms in our sample indicated limited systematic variability across sectors and departments covered by our data. Hence, the use of individual-level analysis was justified for this research context. However, it would be beneficial for future studies to be conducted in contexts that have greater inter-group variance and examine cross-level effects of situational cues as well. Furthermore, since the study sample consisted of middle to high-level managers from large, well-established firms, our sample is likely to comprise employees with generally higher levels of AS than the general population of employees. Hence, our tests regarding the influence of AS were rather conservative, yet we were still able to find significant effects. Conducting future studies with more heterogeneous samples may be beneficial.

In the current study, we investigated the performance-oriented contextual cues that are most prominent in the extant literature and have high conceptual relevance for AS activation. However, the factors indicated here do not constitute an exhaustive list and there are likely to be other contextual factors that can activate or deactivate achievement motivation. For example, other leadership styles such as empowering leadership, paternalistic leadership, or leader-member exchange can increase normative pressures on employees to perform by engendering stronger social obligations (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008; Walumba,

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Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2011). Researchers are encouraged to explore the effects of other possible situational cues that may be theoretically and/or contextually relevant.

Lastly, while personality is often assumed to be stable and static, scholars are now focusing on how personality traits can develop over time in response to contextual factors. Recent conceptualizations in TAT discuss how fit or misfit between work demands and affordances can facilitate adjustments in personality development (Woods, Wille, Wu, Lievens, & De Fruyt, 2018). Hence, it would be beneficial for future studies to examine within-person variance using longitudinal designs to test whether the demands-trait interactions that we found can predict future changes in employees' personality traits, motivation, and work behaviors.

Conclusion

Adopting a person-situation interactionist approach, the current study aimed to address the ambiguity in the extant theoretical and empirical literature regarding the nature of the goal difficulty-commitment relationship by examining the regulating role of the AS personality trait. The findings provide overall support for the TAT-based model. When high AS employees are assigned goals that they perceive to be difficult, highly performance-oriented and autonomous contextual cues are associated with higher levels of commitment. Conversely, low AS employees' commitment to difficult goals deteriorate when they perceive high levels of social and organizational pressures to perform. These findings highlight the shortcomings of the dominant one-size-fits-all approach to work motivation and the need to account for personality differences in goal pursuit when studying the impact of work demands and situational inducements used to enhance performance.

Accepted Article

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

	Variables	N	M	Max	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Goal commitment	780	5.21	6	.72	(.73)						
2.	Goal difficulty	780	4.51	6	.99	.31**	(.73)					
3.	Achievement striving	297	4.30	5	.46	.35**	.14**	(.78)				
4.	Transformational leadership	297	3.66	5	.82	.28**	.19**	.20**	(.97)			
5.	Perceived peer group norms	297	4.90	6	.70	.39**	.22**	.39**	.36**	(.81)		
6.	Reward expectancy	297	4.48	6	.99	.31**	.20**	.29**	.47**	.38**	(.86)	
7.	Psychological empowerment	297	5.23	6	.48	.37**	.22**	.45**	.49**	.52**	.39**	(.83)

Note. Coefficient alphas are reported on the diagonal in parentheses. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

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Table 2

Results of Multilevel Regression Analyses for Goal Commitment

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
Fixed Effects	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Achievement striving (AS)	.32**	.07	.30**	.07	.29**	.07	.29**	.07	.27**	.07
Goal difficulty (GD)	.19**	.02	.17**	.02	.17**	.02	.16**	.02	.16**	.02
Transformational leadership (TL)	.02	.04	.02	.04	.03	.04	.02	.04	.03	.04
Perceived peer group norms (GN)	.12**	.05	.11*	.05	.09	.05	.09	.05	.12*	.05
Reward expectancy (RE)	.05	.04	.04	.04	.04	.03	.04	.03	.05	.03
Psychological empowerment (PE)	.21**	.08	.22**	.08	.24**	.08	.24**	.08	.21**	.08
AS × GD			-.17**	.05	-.17**	.05	-.12**	.05	-.16**	.05
AS × TL			.08	.08						
GD × TL			-.05	.03						
AS × GN					.19**	.09				
GD × GN					-.05	.03				
AS × RE							.03	.06		
GD × RE							-.09	.02		
AS × PE									.18**	.13
GD × PE									-.06	.05
AS × GD × TL			.14**	.05						
AS × GD × GN					.15**	.06				
AS × GD × RE							.10**	.04		
AS × GD × PE									.28**	.09
-2 Log Likelihood	1365.94		1332.32		1330.61		1318.34		1329.01	
Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC)	1387.94		1362.31		1360.60		1348.33		1359.01	

Note. N = 296. Model 1: main effects only; Model 2: transformational leadership interactions; Model 3: perceived peer group norms interactions; Model 4: reward expectancy interactions; Model 5: psychological empowerment interactions. Unstandardized regression coefficients are provided. Maximum likelihood (ML) estimation, diagonal repeated covariance type and unstructured random covariance structure were utilized. All variables were grand mean centered. $^{*}p \leq .05$; $^{**}p \leq .01$.

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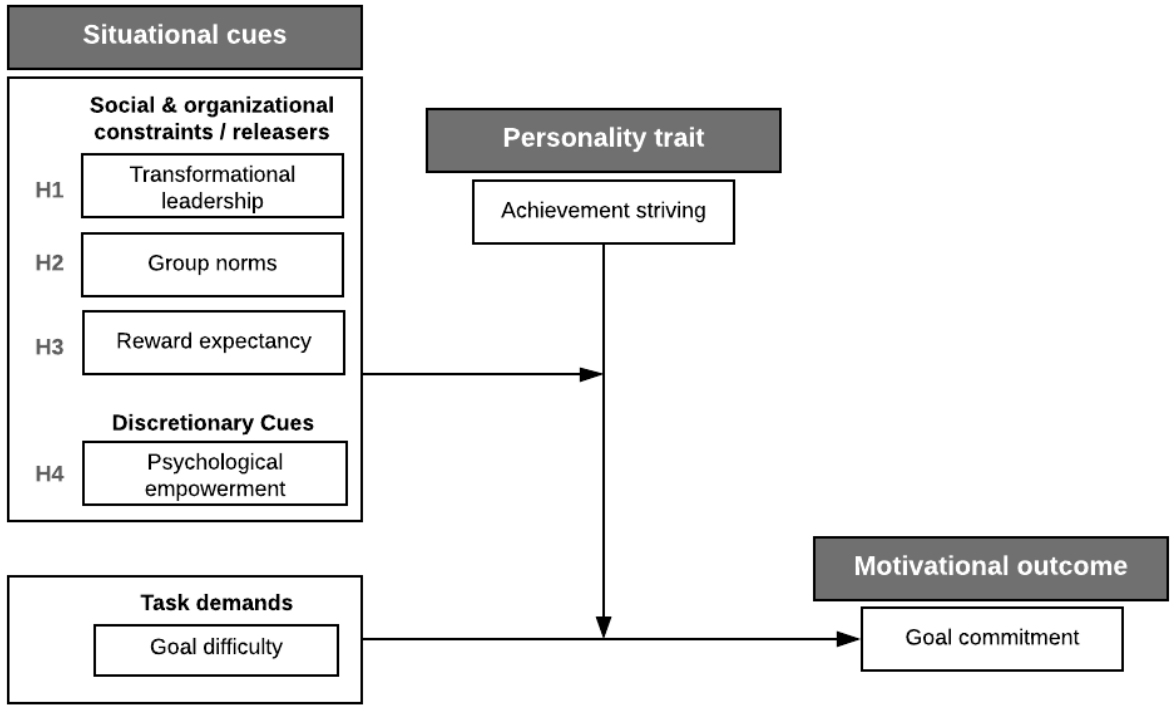


Figure 1. Hypothesized study model.

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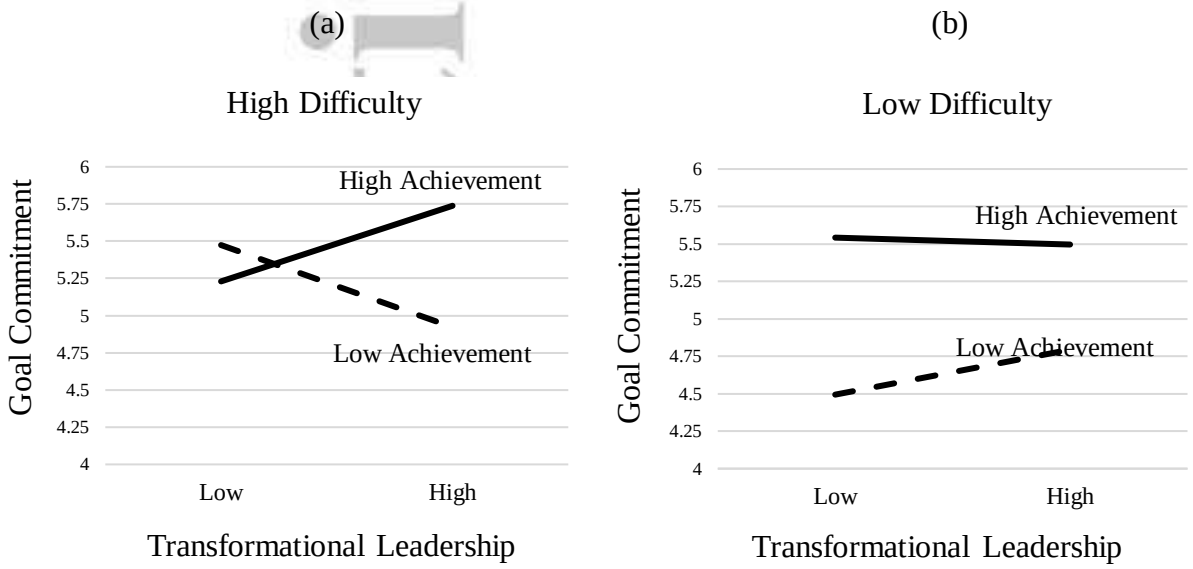


Figure 2. Plots of three-way interactions of transformational leadership, achievement striving, and goal difficulty on goal commitment (Hypothesis 1).

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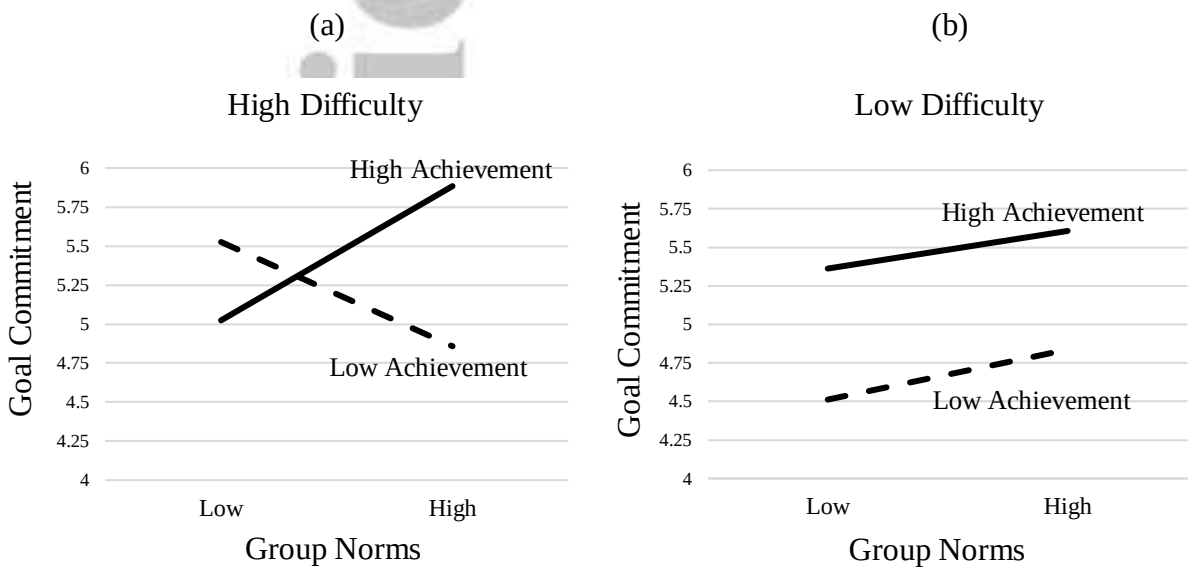


Figure 3. Plots of three-way interactions of group norms about performance goals, achievement striving, and goal difficulty on goal commitment (Hypothesis 2).

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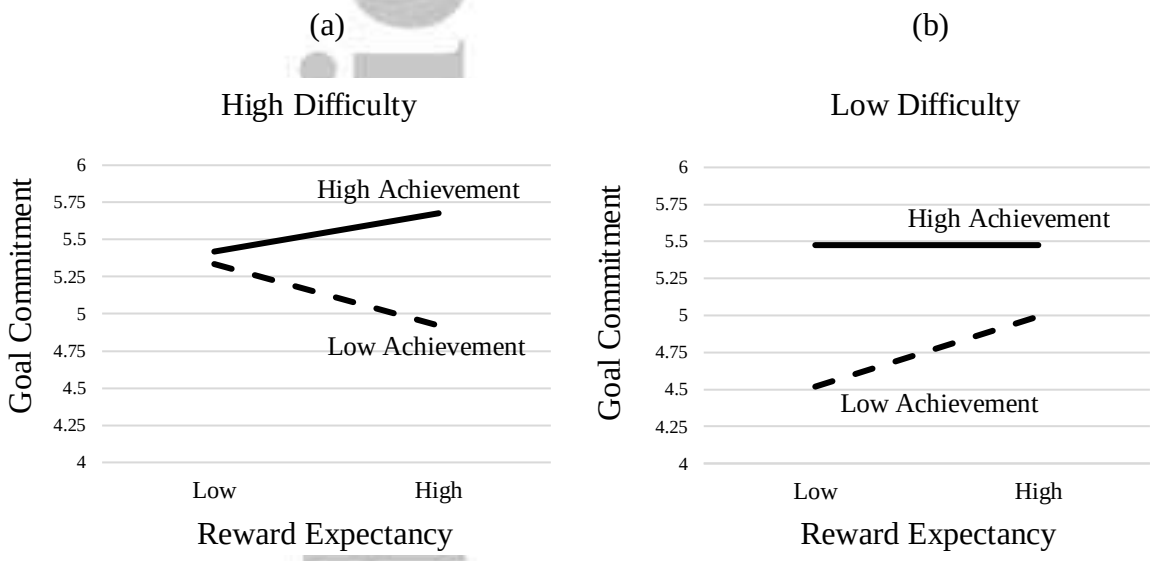


Figure 4. Plots of three-way interaction of reward expectancy, achievement striving, and goal difficulty on goal commitment (Hypothesis 3).

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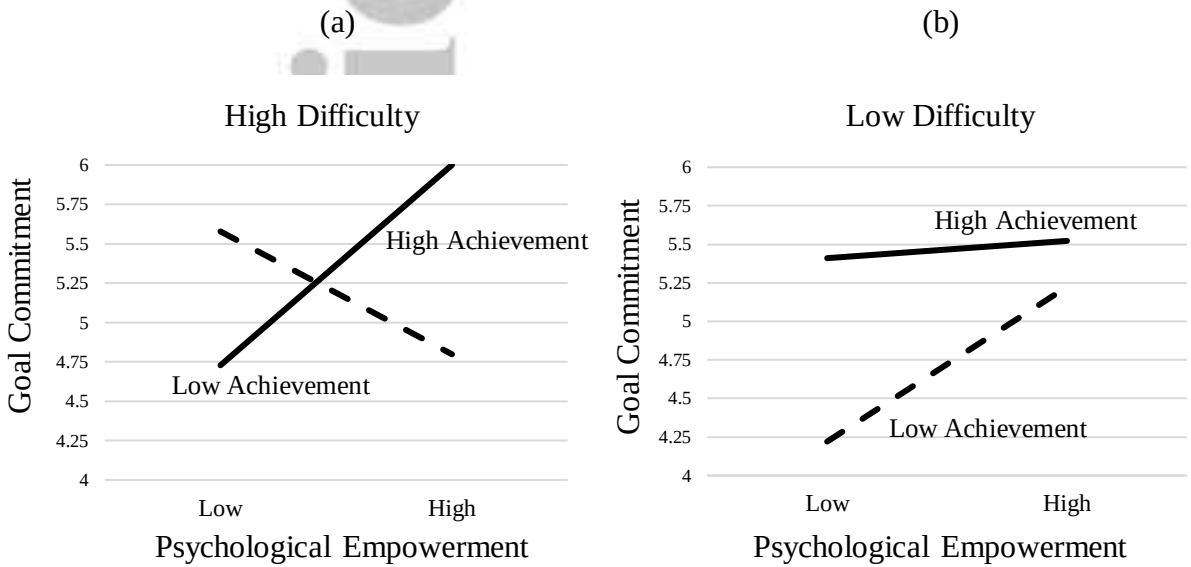


Figure 5. Plots of three-way interactions between psychological empowerment regarding work goals, achievement striving, and goal difficulty on goal commitment (Hypothesis 4).

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