the Motivating Power of Money: Understanding Money’S Unique Effect on Motivation

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Previous research suggests that money can increase motivation to achieve personal goals. We demonstrate that money increases pursuit of goals that validate competence (high attainability), but reduces pursuit of goals that challenge competence (low attainability). Thus, this research identifies the needs made salient by activating money —validating one’s abilities.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019247/volumes/v43/NA-43

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The notion that money can influence behavior has recently gained prominence. Priming concepts of money can motivate work on tasks (Vohs et al. 2006), and individuals with increased wealth feel more in control over their lives (Kraus et al. 2012). Although prior work shows that money increases preference for personal (vs. social) goals, relevant goal factors are not manipulated, making it difficult to understand precisely why feeling one has money could increase motivation. The present work attempts to clarify how money may affect goal pursuit, by varying goal attainability and focusing on important personal goals.

Research has shown that increased difficulty associated with achieving goals can enhance pursuit with more important objectives. Moreover, if having money leads to greater self-sufficiency, individuals may feel they can achieve any challenging goal. However, we consider that having money may instead create a need to validate one’s abilities (Elliott and Dweck 1988), as research shows that participants primed with money act in ways consistent with this goal orientation (Grant and Dweck 2003). We predict that priming individuals with money and wealth, rather than creating a sense one can do anything, leads individuals to pursue goals that validate their competence (high attainability), but disengage from goals that challenge competence (low attainability).

In study 1, we use a 2 (Control/Money) between subjects design. Individuals first participated in a sentence scrambling priming task, with those in the money condition exposed to money and wealth related (vs. neutral) phrases. Individuals then listed an important but less attainable goal, rated their likelihood of pursuit and feelings of efficacy. Results showed that individuals in the money condition were less likely to pursue the goal; moreover, efficacy ratings were lower for the money condition. Efficacy perceptions mediated the effect of prime on likelihood of goal pursuit.

For study 2, a 2 Prime (Money/Control) x 2 Attainability (High/Low) between subjects design was used. Individuals participated in the priming procedure from Study 1. Individuals were then told they would participate in a word scramble task to test their intelligence. For the high (low) attainability condition, individuals were told that to perform well they should unscramble at least 8 (32) words. Performance was determined by word completion. A prime x attainability interaction emerged for performance. In the high attainability condition, individuals in the money condition completed more words relative to control; in the low attainability condition, individuals in the money condition completed fewer words than the control condition.

For study 3, we hold time spent constant when manipulating goal attainability. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 Prime (Money/Control) x 2 Attainability (High/Low) between subjects design. The priming manipulation presented images of money (vs. geometric figures for control) during a filler task. Individuals then indicated their motivation to complete a word fragment task. For the high attainability condition, individuals were told that to perform well, they needed to build on at least 14 word fragments, and generate at least 2 words for each fragment. For the low attainability condition, individuals had to build on fewer fragments (4), but generate more words (7; thus completing same number of words in each condition). Individuals were asked how motivated they would be to perform well. A significant interaction emerged, with individuals in the money condition more motivated than control in the high attainability condition, though less motivated than control group in the low attainability condition.

In study 4, we identify process more directly through a self-handicapping manipulation. We predict that if individuals primed with money are interested in protecting efficacy, they should persist more with a handicap, as concern about validating ability is removed. The study followed a 2 Prime (Money/Control) x 2 Handicap (Present/Absent) between subjects design. The prime and task from study 2 with just the low attainability condition (completing 32 words to do well) was used. In the handicap present condition, individuals were told that for the test to measure their actual abilities, individuals needed to practice, but they were asked to join the no practice group instead. Individuals in the no-handicap condition proceeded to the test. A significant interaction emerged for time spent on the task. For the no handicap condition, individuals in the control group spent more time on the task compared to money condition, while for the handicap condition, those in the money condition spent longer on the task than the control.

In study 5 and 6, we examine consumption contexts. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 Prime (Money/Control) x 2 Attainability (High/Low) between subjects design for both studies, and first took part in the picture priming manipulation used in study 3. In study 5, individuals are next told to think about using a tablet product for a class where they feel it is easy (difficult) to get a good grade, and asked how much they would pay for a tablet. A significant prime x attainability interaction emerged. In the high attainability condition, individuals in the money condition were willing to pay more compared to the control; in the low attainability condition, individuals in the money condition were less willing to pay. In study 6, individuals after the prime were told that they would evaluate an exercise program. For the high (low) attainability condition, the program recommended at least 3 (7) workouts a week. Individuals were asked how willing they would be to buy the program, and efficacy perceptions were measured. A significant prime x attainability interaction emerged for willingness to buy. In the high attainability condition, individuals in the money condition were more willing to buy the program compared to the control; in the low attainability condition, individuals in the money condition were less willing. Efficacy perceptions mediated willingness to buy for the low attainability condition.

By focusing on important personal goals and varying goal attainability, we demonstrate when activating the concept of money can motivate goal pursuit. Thus, this research bridges work on the psychology of money with achievement motivation, pinpointing the needs that money leads individuals to focus on—validating one’s abilities.

REFERENCES
