

How Current Failures Affect Evaluations of Future Goals: Distinct Mechanisms in High- versus Low-Self-Threat Contexts

Authors: Wang Yuting, Li Lin, Song Jingjing, Hou Zhijun, Hou Zhijun

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Abstract

[Objective] To investigate how current failure influences evaluations of future goals and the underlying mechanism of situational self-threat within this process. [Method] Study 1 (N = 350) conducted an experiment using intelligence tests (6 weight estimation items and 6 quantity estimation items) under low self-threat conditions and measured anticipated happiness; Study 2 (N = 407) conducted an experiment using intelligence tests (threat-priming materials) under both high and low self-threat conditions, employing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Affective Experience Subscale for questionnaire surveys. [Results] Results of Study 1 indicated that in tasks where feedback indicated good performance, individuals' anticipated happiness for future excellent performance in that task was low, whereas in tasks where feedback indicated poor performance, individuals' anticipated happiness was high, confirming the "rising to the challenge" hypothesis; Study 2 verified the chain mediating role of affective experience and self-esteem between current performance and anticipated happiness, as well as the moderating role of situational self-threat in this mediation model. Results showed that the "devaluing goals" hypothesis held under high self-threat conditions, while the "rising to the challenge" hypothesis was partially supported under low self-threat conditions. [Limitations] The study primarily investigated anticipated happiness and did not involve actual future happiness experiences; the specific process mechanism underlying the inverted U-shaped relationship between current performance and anticipated happiness under low self-threat conditions warrants further investigation. [Conclusion] (1) Situational self-threat moderates the relationship between current performance and anticipated happiness; (2) Affective experience and self-esteem chain mediate the relationship between current performance in tasks and anticipated happiness; (3) Situational self-threat moderates the current performance → affective experience path in the chain mediation model; (4) The "devaluing goals"

hypothesis holds under high self-threat conditions, while the “rising to the challenge” hypothesis is partially supported under low self-threat conditions.

Full Text

The Impact of Current Failures on the Evaluation of Future Goals: Different Mechanisms of Action in High and Low Self-Threat Situations

Wang Yuting¹, Li Lin¹, Song Jingjing¹, Hou Zhijun^{1*}

¹Institute of Applied Psychology, China University of Geosciences, Wuhan 430074, China

Abstract:

[Objective] This study investigates how current performance feedback affects predicted well-being for future performance in the same task and explores the underlying mechanisms. **[Methods]** Study 1 (N=350) employed an intelligence test (6 weight estimation items and 6 quantity estimation items) in a low self-threat situation and measured predicted well-being. Study 2 (N=407) manipulated both high and low self-threat situations through an intelligence test (threat priming materials) and administered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and an affective experience subscale. **[Results]** Study 1 found that when receiving positive feedback on a task, individuals reported lower predicted well-being for future excellence in that task, whereas when receiving negative feedback, they reported higher predicted well-being, confirming the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis. Study 2 verified the chain mediating role of affective experience and self-esteem between current performance and predicted well-being, as well as the moderating role of situational self-threat in this mediation model. Results indicated that the “belittle the goal” hypothesis held in high self-threat situations, while the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis was partially supported in low self-threat situations. **[Limitations]** The research focused primarily on predicted well-being without examining actual future happiness experiences. The specific process mechanisms underlying the inverted U-shaped relationship between current performance and predicted well-being in low self-threat situations require further investigation. **[Conclusions]** (1) Situational self-threat moderates the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being; (2) Affective experience and self-esteem play a chain mediating role between current performance and predicted well-being; (3) Situational self-threat moderates the current performance → affective experience path in the chain mediation model; (4) The “belittle the goal” hypothesis is supported in high self-threat situations, while the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis is partially supported in low self-threat situations.

Keywords: Self-threat, Predicted well-being, Affective experience, Self-esteem

Classification Codes: B848; B849:C91

1.1 The Relationship Between Current Failure and Predicted Well-Being

Performance rankings in a task influence the happiness people experience. According to social comparison theory [?], when objective standards for self-evaluation are lacking, individuals tend to reduce uncertainty by comparing themselves with similar others. Since one source of happiness comes from social comparison, those who perform well in a task typically experience greater current happiness than those who perform poorly. Predicted well-being refers to the happiness individuals anticipate feeling when they succeed at a task in the future. Previous research on the relationship between current failure and predicted well-being has yielded contradictory findings.

Some studies have shown that after an initial failure, individuals tend to lower their expectations for future success, whereas after initial success, they raise these expectations [?]. In this research, failure is demoralizing while success is encouraging. Other studies have demonstrated the opposite pattern, finding that reflecting on failure can enhance courage, motivation, and performance [?], suggesting that failure can be motivating. Thus, after experiencing current failure, do people tend to use the “spiritual victory” approach like Ah Q, mocking and belittling potentially unattainable future goals? Or do they follow the principle that “the unattainable is always in turmoil” and “rarity increases value,” grasping the nettle and finding that more difficult goals have greater anticipated value [?]? Both arguments seem plausible, yet they cannot both be correct under the same conditions. The conditions under which the “belittle the goal” and “grasp the nettle” hypotheses hold warrant deeper investigation.

1.2 The Moderating Role of Self-Threat

Self-threat is operationally defined as a failure experience [?]. According to this definition, the inevitable negative experiences in daily life—such as poor performance, exam or work failures, or outcomes below expectations—all constitute self-threat [?]. This self-threat is more pronounced in individuals who experience clear-cut failures. For example, one experiment found that participants who were certain they had lost a game evaluated the experience more negatively and engaged in less post-event reconstruction than those who believed they still had a fair chance [?]. Even when comparison targets are similar to the self in specific attributes, competitiveness and the implicit standards of comparison may lead individuals to focus on ability differences between themselves and others, perceiving a discrepancy between the self and the standard, thereby triggering self-threat [?].

Based on this operational definition, self-threat appears to relate only to feedback received after failure without involving specific situational boundaries. However, life experience tells us that failure in an important exam typically

carries greater threat than failure in a game, indicating that situations do influence self-threat. Research has found that when outcomes are attributed to ability, individuals develop higher success expectations after solving anagrams successfully and lower expectations after failure. Conversely, when outcomes are attributed to luck, individuals develop lower success expectations after success and higher expectations after failure [?]. This difference seems to explain the divergence between the “grasp the nettle” and “belittle the goal” findings in previous research on current failure and predicted well-being. Therefore, using luck-based tasks as low self-threat situations, we propose Hypothesis H1a: In low self-threat situations, individuals who experience current failure will have higher predicted well-being for future success (the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis).

Normal adults are motivated to protect, maintain, or enhance the positivity of their self-concept. When confronted with self-threat, individuals’ initial learning motivation is disrupted, causing them to ignore failure and cease information processing [?], and they act in ways that counteract and minimize the threat—that is, they engage in psychological defense [?]. Psychological defenses against self-threat fall into three categories: compensation, breaking, and resistance [?, ?]. Compensation refers to diminishing the importance of negative information after threat and compensating for current negative feedback with other strengths. For example, after receiving low scores on a test, individuals using compensatory defense strategies would emphasize their abilities in other domains [?]. Breaking involves destroying existing self-constructs after threat and choosing to lower expectations rather than denying negative information. For instance, individuals may avoid disappointment by preparing for losses and protect themselves from potential disappointment by downgrading expectations or even predicting the worst outcomes [?]. Resistance involves refusing to acknowledge negative information about oneself, such as when individuals perform poorly on an ability test but declare that ability level is unrelated to personal identity or success in future life [?]. In summary, after experiencing current failure, individuals threatened by self-threat cease processing the current event and focus on escaping the threat and maintaining self-esteem, making the “belittle the goal” hypothesis more likely to hold universally. Therefore, using ability-based tasks as high self-threat situations, we propose Hypothesis H1b: In high self-threat situations, individuals who experience current failure will have lower predicted well-being for future success (the “belittle the goal” hypothesis).

Using luck-based tasks as low self-threat situations and ability-based tasks as high self-threat situations, if the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis holds in low self-threat situations and the “belittle the goal” hypothesis holds in high self-threat situations, we can verify that situational self-threat explains the boundary conditions for the two hypotheses, demonstrating its moderating role. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis H1: Situational self-threat moderates the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being.

1.3 The Mediating Role of Affective Experience and Self-Esteem

Affective experience may mediate the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being. Affective experience is a fundamental component of subjective well-being [?], and scholars widely agree that life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect constitute the three main components of subjective well-being. According to cognitive theories of emotion, different people exhibit different emotional reactions to the same event or situation because they make different cognitive appraisals (attributions) of environmental events [?]. Thus, current performance feedback in a task influences individuals' affective experience. A meta-analysis found that anticipated emotions have stronger effects on decision-making and behavior than currently experienced emotions [?]. Just as people anticipate prolonged pain after a romantic breakup that does not actually materialize, the impact and duration of current affective experience on predicted well-being in important real-life events are often overestimated [?]. Life events closely related to oneself and the future typically constitute high self-threat situations, where individuals who experience failure often have greater emotional fluctuations and deny the high relevance between their current performance and their personal future. They employ strategies of belittling predicted well-being for self-protection and defense [?]. In relatively unimportant low self-threat situations, however, current performance in a task may not be as important to individuals, thus not causing excessive overestimation of current emotions and predicted well-being.

Self-esteem may also mediate the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being. Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between success/failure and self-esteem: failure directly threatens self-esteem, while success enhances it [?, ?], consistent with the definition of self-threat. However, the relationship between self-esteem and happiness may involve more complexity than the simple positive correlation shown in most previous research. While most studies indicate that self-esteem predicts happiness levels [?, ?] and that individuals with high and stable self-esteem tend to have higher well-being [?], some researchers have found opposite results. For example, self-esteem and subjective well-being were not significantly correlated among people in Pakistan [?], and among migrant workers in China, self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with subjective well-being [?]. The divergence in these minority studies may be due to the moderating role of self-threat. Both self-esteem and happiness are global evaluative variables—happiness involves overall judgments about one's life, while self-esteem involves overall judgments about oneself—resulting in a complex relationship between them [?].

The relationship between affective experience and self-esteem is influenced by implicit theories. Implicit theories posit that people hold different views about personal qualities such as intelligence, athletic ability, social skills, and personality traits [?]. Based on this, researchers have proposed that people hold systematic differences in their implicit theories about emotion regulation: some view emotions as fixed (entity theory), while others view them as malleable

(incremental theory), using more adaptive self-regulatory behaviors when facing challenges to increase their chances of success and maintaining higher self-esteem [?]. This explains why numerous studies show that individuals with high self-esteem tend to experience more positive emotions, with positive emotions and self-esteem showing significant positive correlations [?, ?] and negative emotions showing significant negative correlations with self-esteem [?, ?]. In other words, individuals who are skilled at regulating emotional states, value positive affective experiences [?], and tend to reduce negative affective experiences [?] often have higher self-esteem. Since emotional automation refers to emotion processing that is rapid and not regulated by attention and consciousness [?], the automated processing of affective experience may precede self-esteem processing in the mediation between current performance and self-esteem. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis H2: Affective experience and self-esteem play a chain mediating role between current performance and predicted well-being.

To test these hypotheses, Study 1 used an intelligence test to provide participants with random performance feedback in a low self-threat situation and measured their relative levels of predicted well-being for future excellence in the task to explore whether the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis holds. Study 2 manipulated both high and low self-threat situations to further investigate whether the two hypotheses hold separately under different threat levels, the moderating role of situational self-threat in the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being, and the chain mediating role of current affective experience and self-esteem in the model.

2.1 Method

(1) Participants

We recruited 409 participants online and excluded data from participants who met either of the following criteria: those who had previously received training in weight or quantity estimation; those whose estimation results contained large numbers of repetitions. We obtained 350 valid responses, yielding an effective recovery rate of 85.57%. The sample included 189 males and 161 females, with a mean age of 22.32 years ($SD = 5.77$).

We conducted post-hoc statistical power analysis using G*Power 3.1. Results showed that with the current sample ($N = 350$, effect size $w = 0.3$, $\alpha = 0.05$), the detectable statistical power was 0.997, indicating that the sample size was adequate.

(2) Materials

Experimental materials: Weight estimation test (Test A, 6 items). For example, participants estimated the weight of a whale or an airplane shown in pictures. Quantity estimation test (Test B, 6 items). For example, participants estimated the number of leaves or students shown in pictures. The experiment informed participants that all answers within $\pm 20\%$ of the correct value would

be considered correct. Since estimating the exact answer was nearly impossible, this made the manipulation of current performance feedback relatively suspicion-free. Predicted well-being measurement: Participants rated how happy they would feel if they achieved high scores on Test A or Test B in a subsequent test (on a 100-point scale).

(3) Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four feedback conditions: both Test A and Test B scores were good; Test A score was good but Test B score was poor; Test A score was poor but Test B score was good; or both Test A and Test B scores were poor.

Before the experiment began, a text description stated, “This is a fun quiz,” and participants were told that all answers within $\pm 20\%$ would be considered correct. After completing Tests A and B, participants received different score feedback based on their group assignment and were asked to remember their scores. They then rated how happy they would feel if they achieved high scores on Test A or Test B in a subsequent test (on a 100-point scale).

A manipulation check asked participants to rate the difficulty of achieving high scores on Test A and Test B (0 = “not difficult at all,” 10 = “very difficult”) to ensure that their perceived difficulty was related to the feedback they received. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation.

2.2 Results and Analysis

(1) Manipulation Check

Participants perceived greater difficulty for poor scores than for good scores ($M_{\text{poor}} = 8.44$, $SD_{\text{poor}} = 2.42$ vs. $M_{\text{good}} = 5.37$, $SD_{\text{good}} = 2.64$, $t(687) = 15.96$, $p = 0.045$, $d = 1.21$). Participants completed identical questionnaires but perceived significantly different difficulty levels, confirming that the situation manipulation was effective and that perceived difficulty was related to received feedback.

(2) Effect of Current Performance on Predicted Well-Being

This study manipulated self-threat through false performance feedback and conducted a chi-square test on a 4 (feedback condition: both tests good, Test A good/Test B poor, Test A poor/Test B good, both tests poor) \times 3 (predicted well-being level: high, medium, low) contingency table. Medium predicted well-being was defined as a standard deviation less than 10 in happiness ratings distributed between Test A and Test B. The chi-square test showed $\chi^2(6, N = 350) = 31.06$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that predicted well-being differed across feedback conditions. When feedback indicated both tests were good or both were poor, there was no significant difference in predicted well-being for future excellence on the two tasks. However, when feedback indicated differential performance (one test good, one poor), participants reported lower predicted well-being for

future excellence on the test they had performed well on, and higher predicted well-being for the test they had performed poorly on.

2.3 Discussion

In Study 1, when feedback indicated both tests were good or both were poor, there was no significant difference in predicted well-being for future excellence on the two tasks, suggesting no difference between Tests A and B. However, when feedback conditions differed between the two tests, these groups showed substantial differences in predicted well-being for future excellence on each task. This indicates that after experiencing an inconsequential failure, individuals have higher predicted well-being for future success. In this experiment, Hypothesis H1a (the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis) was supported. However, positive feedback may maintain self-esteem, potentially interfering with the effect of negative feedback on self-esteem. Therefore, Study 2 will manipulate both high and low self-threat situations with a larger sample and more independent experimental conditions to reduce interference between high and low self-threat conditions.

3.1 Method

(1) Participants

We recruited 524 participants online and excluded data from participants who met either of the following criteria: those who had previously received training in weight or quantity estimation; those whose estimation results contained large numbers of repetitions. We obtained 407 valid responses, yielding an effective recovery rate of 77.67%. The sample included 225 males and 182 females, with a mean age of 24.23 years ($SD = 6.358$).

We conducted post-hoc statistical power analysis using G*Power 3.1. Results showed that with the current sample ($N = 407$, effect size $F = 0.25$, $\alpha = 0.05$), the detectable statistical power was 0.954, indicating that the sample size was adequate.

(2) Materials

Threat priming materials: 12 intelligence threat test items involving quantity and weight estimation. The experiment informed participants that all answers within $\pm 20\%$ of the correct value would be considered correct. Since estimating the exact answer was nearly impossible, this made the false feedback manipulation relatively suspicion-free.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES): This scale assesses individuals' overall feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance [?]. It consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point scale, with both positively and negatively worded items. Total scores range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. This

widely used scale is concise, easy to score, and provides a direct assessment of positive or negative feelings about oneself (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities,” “I wish I could have more respect for myself”). In this study, the scale’s Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.727, standardized item α was 0.745, and split-half reliability was 0.844, indicating good reliability for subsequent data analysis.

Affective Experience Subscale: We used the affective experience subscale from the Well-Being Index Scale (WBIS) [?]. This scale includes two components: the affective experience subscale and the life satisfaction subscale. The affective experience subscale measures participants’ current emotional experiences and consists of 8 items describing different aspects of affect, rated on a 7-point scale with both positively and negatively worded items (e.g., 1 = “most happy,” 7 = “most unhappy”). Total scores range from 7 to 56, with higher scores indicating more positive affective experiences. In this study, the scale’s Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.730, standardized item α was 0.717, and split-half reliability was 0.900, indicating good reliability for subsequent data analysis.

Predicted well-being measurement: A single item asked, “Imagine that one month from now you take a new test and your results place you in the top 10% of the population. How happy would that make you?” (0 = “wouldn’t feel this way at all,” 10 = “couldn’t feel this way more”).

(3) Procedure

High and low self-threat situations were manipulated through virtual intelligence test ranking feedback. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two situational groups. One group received the description: “This task includes two fun tests. You need to rely on your intuition to make estimates.” The other group received: “This test is a valid assessment of individual intelligence and ability levels that can predict future achievement and happiness. The more questions you answer correctly, the higher your intelligence and ability levels, and the more likely you are to achieve high success and a happy life in the future. You need to use your estimation ability to answer as quickly as possible.”

After completing the 12 intelligence threat test items, participants received false performance feedback in one of three forms: “Congratulations, you answered 10 out of 12 questions correctly, placing you in the top 15% of the population. This indicates excellent performance”; “You answered 6 out of 12 questions correctly, placing you around the 50th percentile. This indicates average performance”; or “Unfortunately, you answered only 2 out of 12 questions correctly, placing you in the bottom 15% of the population. This indicates very poor performance.”

Participants then completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the affective experience subscale, and the single predicted well-being item. A manipulation check asked participants to rate the difficulty of achieving high scores (0 = “not difficult at all,” 10 = “very difficult”) to ensure that perceived difficulty was related to received feedback. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation.

3.2 Results and Analysis

(1) Common Method Bias Control

The KMO value was 0.904 (> 0.7), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis. Since the prerequisites for factor analysis were met, we used Harman's single-factor test for statistical examination. Five principal components had eigenvalues greater than 1, with a cumulative contribution rate of 64.15%. The first principal component explained 27.62% of the variance, with no factor showing excessive explanatory power. Therefore, common method bias in this study was within reasonable limits, and the questionnaire had good structural validity.

(2) Manipulation Check

Participants with better current performance tended to perceive the test as less difficult, followed by those with medium performance ($M_{\text{good}} = 6.32$, $SD_{\text{good}} = 2.72$ vs. $M_{\text{medium}} = 7.49$, $SD_{\text{medium}} = 2.62$, $t(266) = -3.57$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.44$). Participants with poor performance perceived the test as most difficult ($M_{\text{good}} = 6.32$, $SD_{\text{good}} = 2.72$ vs. $M_{\text{poor}} = 8.17$, $SD_{\text{poor}} = 2.35$, $t(276) = -6.066$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.73$; $M_{\text{medium}} = 7.49$, $SD_{\text{medium}} = 2.62$ vs. $M_{\text{poor}} = 8.17$, $SD_{\text{poor}} = 2.35$, $t(266) = -2.25$, $p = 0.025$, $d = 0.27$). Post-hoc multiple comparisons across feedback groups showed significant differences ($F = 18.425$, $p < 0.001$), with significant pairwise differences between groups ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the situation manipulation was effective, and perceived difficulty was related to received feedback.

(3) Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables ($N = 407$). Correlation analysis revealed that current performance was significantly negatively correlated with affective experience, self-esteem, and predicted well-being. Affective experience, self-esteem, and predicted well-being were significantly positively correlated with each other. Age was significantly correlated with affective experience, self-esteem, and predicted well-being and was controlled for in subsequent analyses. Gender was not significantly correlated with the variables of interest (affective experience, self-esteem, predicted well-being). These relationships support subsequent hypothesis testing. After controlling for age, current performance significantly negatively predicted predicted well-being, $\beta = -0.108$, $p = 0.028$, with model $R = 0.16$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $F(2, 404) = 5.19$, $p = 0.006$.

(4) Mediation Analysis

We used SPSS macro PROCESS (Model 6) with current performance as the independent variable, predicted well-being as the dependent variable, affective experience and self-esteem as chain mediators, and age as a control variable. The chain mediation model path coefficients are shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

The overall regression equation was significant, $R^2 = 0.11$, $F(4, 402) = 12.67$, $p < 0.001$. We estimated the 95% confidence interval for mediation effects using 5000 bootstrap samples. Results showed a total effect of -0.109 ($p < 0.001$). The confidence intervals for Path 1 (mediated by affective experience alone) and Path 2 (mediated by self-esteem alone) contained zero, indicating non-significant indirect effects. However, Path 3 (mediated by both affective experience and self-esteem) showed a significant indirect effect of 0.042 (95% CI = $[-0.069, -0.016]$), confirming that affective experience and self-esteem play a chain mediating role in the negative effect of current performance on predicted well-being, supporting H2.

Table 2 shows the mediation effect analysis. The indirect effect through both mediators accounted for 46.79% of the total indirect effect.

When grouping by high and low self-threat situations, the regression equation was significant in the high self-threat situation, $R^2 = 0.15$, $F(4, 204) = 9.24$, $p < 0.001$. Bootstrap analysis (5000 samples) showed a total effect of -0.236 ($p < 0.001$) and a direct effect of -0.145 ($p < 0.05$). The confidence intervals for paths mediated by affective experience alone and self-esteem alone contained zero, indicating non-significant indirect effects. However, the chain mediation path through both affective experience and self-esteem was significant (indirect effect = -0.040 , 95% CI = $[-0.09, -0.006]$), confirming the chain mediating role. Thus, in high self-threat situations, individuals who experience current failure have lower predicted well-being for future success, supporting Hypothesis H1b (the “belittle the goal” hypothesis). In low self-threat situations, the regression equation was not significant. The significant difference between models in high versus low self-threat situations indicates that situational self-threat moderates the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being, providing preliminary support for H1.

(5) Testing the Effect of Situational Self-Threat on Predicted Well-Being

To further determine whether the model applies to both high and low self-threat situations, we conducted multi-group structural equation modeling. Table 3 shows the standardized path coefficients and critical values for differences between high and low self-threat groups. When the critical value is less than 1.96 (significance level of 0.05), the difference is not significant. Results show no significant differences between groups for the paths from affective experience to self-esteem, current performance to self-esteem, current performance to predicted well-being, affective experience to predicted well-being, and self-esteem to predicted well-being. However, the path from current performance to affective experience differed significantly between groups, indicating that situational self-threat moderates this specific path.

Tables 4 and 5 present model fit and invariance parameters. Compared to M1 (unconstrained model), M2 (constraining measurement and structural weights), M3 (additionally constraining structural covariances), and M4 (additionally constraining structural residuals) showed some adjustments in NFI, IFI, RFI, TLI,

and RMSEA values > 0.05 , with $p < 0.05$ in the group invariance test. This indicates that the model differs significantly between high and low self-threat situations, confirming that situational self-threat plays a moderating role in the model and providing further support for H1.

3.3 Discussion

Study 2 results show that in high self-threat situations, individuals who experience current failure have lower predicted well-being for future success, supporting Hypothesis H1b (the “belittle the goal” hypothesis). Affective experience and self-esteem play a chain mediating role between current performance and predicted well-being, supporting Hypothesis H2. Moreover, this mediation model differs significantly between high and low self-threat situations, with situational self-threat moderating the current performance \rightarrow affective experience path, supporting H1. Specifically, in high self-threat situations, the chain mediation through affective experience and self-esteem is significant, whereas in low self-threat situations, this chain mediation is not significant, and the correlations between current performance and affective experience and between self-esteem and predicted well-being show no stable patterns in direction or magnitude.

4.1 Summary of Results

The two studies included 757 participants total. Study 1' s 350 participants came from a university in Wuhan, while Study 2' s 407 participants were more geographically diverse, coming from across the country to avoid single-group bias. Despite variations in methods and samples, convergent evidence from the two studies with different approaches increases the generality and validity of the conclusions.

Results show that in high self-threat situations, poorer current performance predicts lower predicted well-being, supporting the “belittle the goal” hypothesis. This aligns with common sense: for example, a student who performs well on an important exam experiences no self-threat and thus does not need to belittle future goals to maintain self-esteem, whereas a student who performs poorly is more likely to use defensive strategies of belittling future goals and predicted well-being to protect vulnerable self-esteem after setbacks. In Study 2' s low self-threat situation, individuals who received poor current performance feedback reported slightly higher predicted well-being for future high performance than those who received good feedback. This pattern, opposite to that in high self-threat situations and consistent with Study 1' s results, again supports the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis. However, current performance was not simply correlated with predicted well-being; instead, the relationship showed an inverted U-shape ($M_{\text{good}} \pm SD = 8.98 \pm 1.99$, $M_{\text{medium}} \pm SD = 9.07 \pm 1.54$, $M_{\text{poor}} \pm SD = 8.53 \pm 1.99$), with individuals receiving medium-level

current performance showing the highest predicted well-being for future high performance.

4.2 The Inverted U-Shaped Relationship in Low Self-Threat Situations

This inverted U-shaped phenomenon appears to have deeper underlying causes. Cultural background influences people's understanding of happiness and ways to enhance it [?]. As a core concept in traditional Chinese Confucian culture, the Zhongyong (doctrine of the mean) profoundly influences Chinese psychology and behavior, resulting in different happiness orientations compared to Westerners [?]. Scholars have proposed that people tend to engage in upward social comparison with salient high performers, but in collectivist countries, they may be more influenced by collective and organizational values [?]. China is a collectivist culture that emphasizes group harmony and requires individuals to identify their shortcomings and strive to improve them. A medium current performance neither excessively damages self-esteem nor prevents individuals from considering desired goals when making predicted well-being judgments, while also satisfying social cultural expectations and others' feelings. Therefore, producing the highest predicted well-being for future high performance aligns well with the Chinese cultural context. In high self-threat situations, individuals are in a "competitive" state, focusing more on striving for higher performance. In low self-threat situations, individuals are in their daily baseline state and thus, influenced by China's "doctrine of the mean," tend to avoid standing out in non-self-relevant matters while still satisfying their inner pursuit of better future outcomes. This may appropriately explain why predicted well-being shows an inverted U-shape with current performance in low self-threat situations but a negative correlation in high self-threat situations. However, some global examples also seem to support the possibility that the inverted U-shape in low self-threat situations may be a universal psychological phenomenon beyond culture. For instance, in daily life situations, games that are too difficult or too easy are less playable and attractive than moderately difficult games. Future research should investigate from a cross-cultural perspective whether the inverted U-shaped relationship between predicted well-being and current performance in low self-threat situations is universal across different cultural backgrounds.

4.3 Joint Influence of Current Performance and Self-Threat Situation

Researchers have found through six intelligence threat experiments that people cope with failure by belittling the value of future goals. However, an additional survey (N = 100) found that when predicting participants' predicted well-being from a third-party perspective, those who improved from a poor test result to an excellent one had higher predicted well-being than those who consistently performed well [?]. The present study set up high self-threat situations as highly self-relevant and competitive ability tests, while low self-threat situations were set up as irrelevant games based on "intuition," yielding the same results.

This can be explained by the situational dependency of self-threat: whether a stimulus is considered a threat depends on the specific context [?]. When people analyze objectively without experiencing the pain of failure themselves, they are not in a threat situation and thus, being in a non-threatening or low-threat situation, do not anticipate participants' defensive reactions. In other words, current performance and self-threat situation work together to construct a complex self-threat model. Individuals construct judgments of self-threat level based on current assessments, adjusting future goals by integrating situational threat level and current performance threat level.

4.4 The Chain Mediation Path

The finding that single mediation paths for affective experience and self-esteem were not significant while the chain mediation path was significant also warrants discussion. Researchers have proposed the concept of self-esteem stability—the degree of short-term fluctuation in global self-esteem [?]. Self-esteem stability is not significantly correlated with self-esteem level, and unstable self-esteem is associated with anger and hostility. This tendency is more pronounced in individuals with unstable high self-esteem, who may exhibit overreactions to maintain their fragile self-concept [?]. Research on the predictive effects of implicit and explicit self-esteem on subjective well-being has yielded mixed results. Some scholars find that explicit self-esteem correlates significantly with subjective well-being while implicit self-esteem shows low correlation [?], whereas others confirm that among individuals with high explicit self-esteem, higher implicit self-esteem predicts higher subjective well-being, but among those with low explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem does not affect subjective well-being [?]. These divergent findings on implicit self-esteem reflect the complexity of implicit processing. Implicit psychological processes influence behavioral responses [?]. In this study, the measurement of affective experience reflects short-term emotional fluctuations after receiving current performance feedback, while the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) typically measures explicit self-esteem. The implicit processing of emotion precedes explicit self-esteem processing, so in the chain mediation model, affective experience precedes self-esteem, and single mediation paths are not significant.

4.5 Practical Implications for Enhancing Predicted Well-Being

In daily life, people often make self-protective disengagement responses when they feel the gap between their current state and goals is too large after failure, which may cause significant negative effects during social comparison. How can we reduce this negative impact? In high self-threat situations, after initial failure, individuals can use successes in other domains to maintain higher emotional and self-esteem levels, or they can cut losses by disengaging from the goal. Research on self-regulation suggests that maintaining unrealistic fantasies about the future may actually harm motivation and goal progress [?], so redirecting effort to different, more achievable goals can enhance well-being [?], or choos-

ing to disengage from unattainable goals prevents wasting time and energy on futile pursuits [?]. In low self-threat situations, setting a medium-level future goal is more likely to generate higher predicted well-being to motivate effort, and overestimating future emotions can motivate people to work harder toward achievable goals [?, ?].

4.6 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that warrant further investigation. First, the research focused primarily on predicted well-being without examining actual future happiness experiences. Future studies should employ longer-term experimental designs and include measures of actual well-being to complete the mechanism of how self-threat affects actual happiness. Second, the study constructed a model of how current performance affects predicted well-being in high self-threat situations, while in low self-threat situations it mainly discussed the inverted U-shaped relationship between current performance and predicted well-being. The specific process mechanisms underlying this relationship require future comparative analysis and investigation. Finally, beyond explaining the relationship between current performance and future predicted well-being and the impact of current performance on future goal pursuit, self-threat may offer new perspectives for other issues in social comparison. Future research could explore the relationship between self-threat and other variables from this angle.

This study confirms that: (1) Situational self-threat moderates the relationship between current performance and predicted well-being; (2) Affective experience and self-esteem play a chain mediating role between current performance and predicted well-being; (3) Situational self-threat moderates the current performance \rightarrow affective experience path in the chain mediation model; (4) The “belittle the goal” hypothesis is supported in high self-threat situations, while the “grasp the nettle” hypothesis is partially supported in low self-threat situations. These findings provide empirical support for the mechanism by which current performance affects predicted well-being and offer new evidence and insights for understanding how to escape cognitive dissonance resulting from social comparison.

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Author Contributions:

Wang Yuting: Conceptualized the research; designed and refined the research protocol; implemented the research process; acquired, provided, and analyzed data; drafted and revised the manuscript.

Li Lin: Designed and refined the research protocol; proposed structural equation modeling multi-group comparisons; reviewed and revised the manuscript.

Song Jingjing: Proposed self-threat related perspectives; designed and refined the research protocol; reviewed and revised the manuscript.

Hou Zhijun: Conceptualized the research; reviewed and revised the manuscript.

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