

## Background

**Brandtstädter's action theory of life span development**<sup>1</sup> suggests that adaptive functioning over the life course involves self-regulation, purposeful self-development, and goal setting. These processes involve two strategies: readjusting goals to meet changing life circumstances (**assimilation; goal adjustment**)<sup>2</sup> or fitting new circumstances into current goals (**accommodation; goal pursuit**).<sup>2</sup>

Applied to a prison population, potential barriers to achieving a desired goal include inadequate mental health care, prison culture, and inability to secure stable employment post-release, which has a robust association with criminal desistance.<sup>3</sup>

These barriers may result in a sense of loss of control and feelings of isolation and helplessness (i.e., **learned helplessness**)<sup>4</sup> in incarcerated people could allow for a greater understanding of the mechanisms involved in mental illness in incarcerated people and limited engagement in desistance practices

## Purpose of Study

**The study aims** to contribute to an understanding of barriers to successful transitions in prosocial behaviour and criminal desistance using a developmental model.

**H1:** Both depression and learned helplessness will predict variability in motivation and, in addition, learned helplessness will be a stronger predictor of motivation in this population than depression.

**H2:** The relationship between learned helplessness, depression, and motivation will be mediated by two indicators of human agency, according to action theory: participants with higher scores on depression or learned helplessness will have less accommodative strategies and greater assimilative strategies, resulting in poorer motivation for prosocial goals towards employment after incarceration.

## Methods

### Participants

- Sample of  $N = 61$  adult male incarcerated persons across two correctional facilities in Ontario
- Mean age = ~39 years ( $SD = 9.15$ )

**Note: Motivation** to set prosocial goals after incarceration **is operationalized as goal attainment in the employment domain.**

### Data

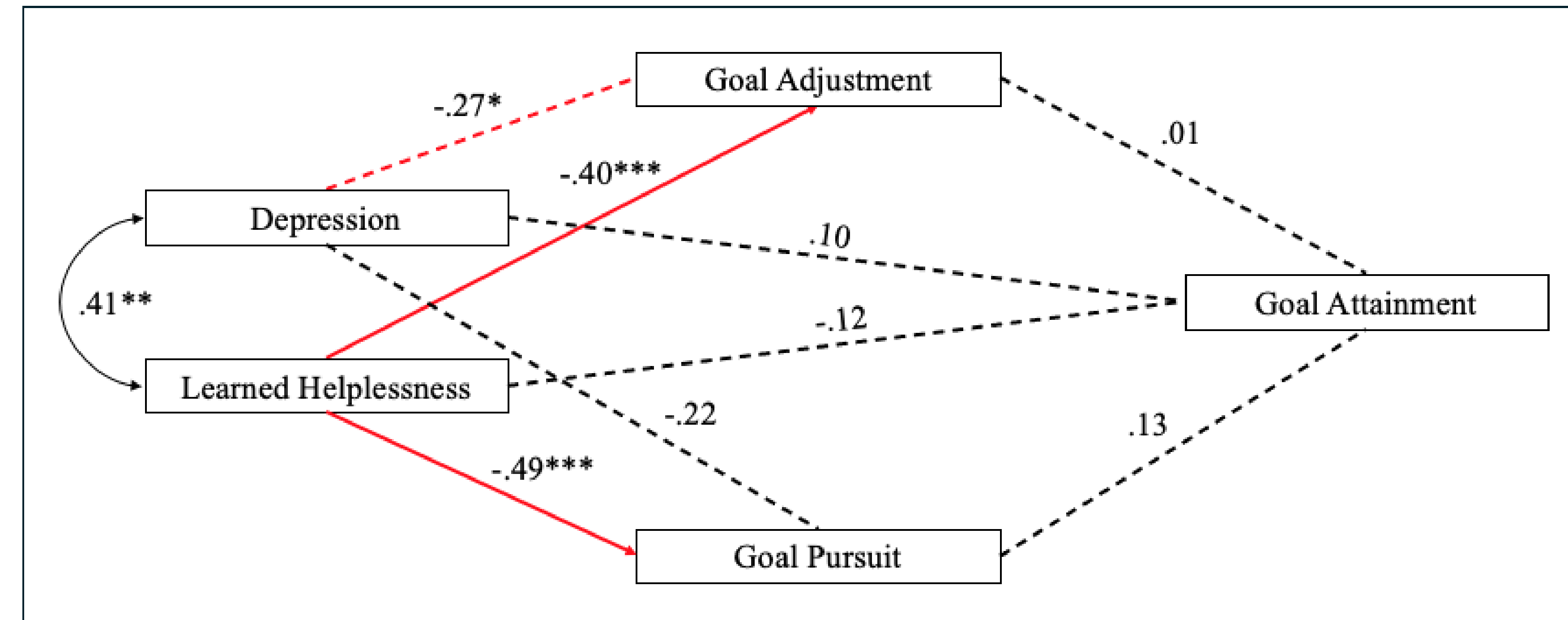
- Demographics questionnaire
- Measures of: 1) depression (DASS-21); 2) learned helplessness; 3) human agency (goal pursuit, goal adjustment); 4) goal attainment

### Analyses

- SEM using AMOS; Bivariate correlations.
- **Note: Age** not included as a covariate as not found to be correlated with any model variables.

## Results

**Figure 1**  
Structural Equation Model of Learned Helplessness and Depression on Motivation as Mediated by Human Agency



Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	58	38.40	9.15	—	.02	.04	-.20	-.22	.12
2. Learned helplessness	61	45.80	9.08		—	.51**	-.60**	-.54**	-.16
3. Depression	61	17.41	9.08			—	-.47**	-.47**	-.04
4. Goal pursuit	61	50.58	13.29				—	.55**	.17
5. Goal adjustment	61	49.06	9.64					—	.11
6. Goal attainment	61	12.23	5.32						—

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

## Outcomes

Findings from the SEM show that **there is no mediation within our model and no direct effects between depression or learned helplessness and goal attainment** in the employment domain.

The relationships between **learned helplessness** and our **measures of human agency** are **statistically significant** in that **increases** in an **external locus of control result in poorer assimilation and adjustment strategies.**

Bivariate correlations demonstrate a **statistically significant correlation between predictor variables on goal adjustment and goal pursuit**, but not with the outcome variable.

## Discussion

The action theory suggests a degree of internal locus of control.<sup>1</sup> Individuals experiencing learned helplessness and depression may struggle to access adaptive coping strategies, further limiting their capacity for goal setting and the pursuit of desistance-related behaviors.

For those in long-term incarceration, this may be adaptive to adjust to incarceration (i.e., no control over day-to-day activities, length of sentence) but, post-release, these new methods of thinking and coping may, in fact, inhibit criminal desistance. Therefore, rehabilitation programs should emphasize promoting internal control and adaptive coping mechanisms to support successful reintegration.

### Limitations

- Measures focused on global constructs of learned helplessness and goal pursuit and accommodation as opposed to specific to employment goals.

### References

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4. Tripodi, S., Kim, J. S., Bender, K. (2010). Is employment associated with reduced recidivism?: The complex relationship between employment and crime. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 54(5), 706-720. DOI: 10.1177/0306624X09342980

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