



Maladaptive Ambition Theory: A Novel Motivational Model for the Rigidification of Solution-Seeking in the Development of Addiction

Uyumsuz Hırs Kuramı: Bağımlılık Gelişiminde Çözüm Arayışının Katılaşmasına İlişkin Yeni Bir Motivasyonel Model

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Abstract:

Addictive disorders are multidimensional psychopathological constructs that develop through the interaction of biological predispositions, psychological processes, and environmental experiences. Contemporary approaches conceptualize addiction not solely in terms of reward-seeking or loss of control, but within the broader context of motivational dynamics, difficulties in emotion regulation, cognitive appraisals, and life experiences. Nevertheless, the conditions under which an individual's search for solutions in the face of psychological entrapment becomes rigidly focused on a single goal—and thereby contributes to the development of addiction—remain insufficiently clarified. This article defines Maladaptive Ambition Theory as the process by which a person's initially adaptive search for solutions to psychological or developmental entrapment gradually loses cognitive flexibility and becomes concentrated around a single goal, resulting in the rigidification of solution-seeking into a fixed motivational pattern. According to the theory, the problem does not lie in the intensity of ambition, but in the perception that ambition represents the sole path to resolving one's difficulties. Maladaptive Ambition Theory is articulated through five core components: mental preoccupation, exclusion of alternative solutions, risk-taking for the sake of the goal, persistent commitment, and persistence despite adverse outcomes. This theoretical perspective suggests that addictive behaviors can be understood not only in terms of seeking pleasure or avoiding discomfort, but also as the result of a solution-seeking process that, over time, becomes increasingly inflexible. The theory is also discussed in relation to the Developmental Layered Pathway Model (DLPM). While the DLPM explains the role of developmental risk factors in addiction, Maladaptive Ambition Theory offers a complementary motivational mechanism that accounts for why an individual becomes progressively more attached to a specific goal throughout this process. In this framework, ambition is not conceived simply as setting high goals or striving for achievement, but as a rigid form of goal commitment that emerges when an individual perceives a particular goal as the only way out of psychological entrapment.

Keywords: Maladaptive ambition, Addiction, Motivation, Entrapment, Solution-seeking, Maladaptive daydreaming, Gambling disorder.

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Öz:

Bağımlılık bozuklukları, biyolojik yatkınlıklar, psikolojik süreçler ve çevresel yaşantıların etkileşimi sonucunda gelişen çok boyutlu psikopatolojik yapılarıdır. Güncel yaklaşımlar bağımlılığı yalnızca ödül arayışı veya kontrol kaybı üzerinden değil; motivasyonel süreçler, duygu düzenleme güçlükleri, bilişsel değerlendirmeler ve yaşam deneyimleri bağlamında ele almaktadır (Koob & Volkow, 2016; Potenza, 2014). Bununla birlikte, bireyin yaşamındaki psikolojik sıkışmışlık karşısında geliştirdiği çözüm arayışının hangi koşullarda tek bir hedef etrafında katılaşarak bağımlılık gelişimine katkıda bulunabileceği yeterince açıklanmamıştır. Bu makalede Uyumsuz Hırs Kuramı, bireyin yaşadığı psikolojik veya gelişimsel sıkışmışlığı çözmek amacıyla başlayan doğal çözüm arayışının zaman içinde bilişsel esnekliğini kaybederek tek bir hedef etrafında yoğunlaşması ve katı bir motivasyonel örüntüye dönüşmesi olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Kurama göre sorun hırsın yoğunluğu değil; hırsın bireyin yaşamındaki sorunları çözebilecek tek yol olarak algılanmaya başlanmasıdır. Uyumsuz Hırs Kuramı: zihinsel işgal, alternatif çözüm yollarını dışlama, hedef uğruna risk alma, ısrarcı hedef bağlılığı ve olumsuz sonuçlara rağmen sürdürme olmak üzere beş temel bileşen üzerinden açıklanmaktadır. Bu kuramsal yaklaşım, bağımlılık davranışlarının yalnızca haz arayışı veya kaçınma motivasyonu ile değil, bireyin çözüm üretme çabasının zamanla nasıl katılaşabileceği üzerinden de anlaşılabilirliğini ileri sürmektedir. Kuram ayrıca Gelişimsel Katmanlı Geçiş Modeli (Developmental Layered Pathway Model; DLPM) ile ilişkili olarak ele alınmaktadır. DLPM, gelişimsel risklerin bağımlılık sürecindeki rolünü açıklarken, Uyumsuz Hırs Kuramı bu süreçte bireyin neden belirli bir hedefe giderek daha fazla bağlandığını açıklayan tamamlayıcı bir motivasyonel mekanizma sunmaktadır. Bu kuramda hırs kavramı, yalnızca yüksek hedef belirleme veya başarı yönelimi anlamında değil; bireyin belirli bir hedefi psikolojik sıkışmışlığından kurtulmanın tek yolu olarak algılamaya başlamasıyla ortaya çıkan katı hedef bağlılığı anlamında ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uyumsuz hırs, Bağımlılık, Motivasyon, Psikolojik sıkışmışlık, Çözüm arayışı, Uyumsuz gündüz düşünme, Kumar bozukluğu.

Introduction

An individual's biological predispositions, psychological traits, developmental experiences, and environmental circumstances interact reciprocally to cause addictive disorders, which are complex psychopathological processes. These days, addiction is seen as a result of reward systems, motivational processes, cognitive assessments, and environmental reinforcers in addition to a loss of control (Koob & Volkow, 2016; Potenza, 2014). However, existing models only partially explain how a person's quest for answers to life's problems narrows to a particular objective, turning into a rigid motivational pattern, and how this change may set the stage for addictive behaviors.

Gambling disorder is one of the most significant examples of behavioral addictions for comprehending these processes. The following section will detail the cognitive and motivational mechanisms underlying the maintenance of gambling behavior, a psychologically complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by the pursuit of material gain or excitement alone (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014; Petry, 2005). Instead of using gambling as a recreational activity, some people may use it as a way to change their circumstances, avoid financial difficulties, or make up for past losses. Among the main approaches explaining the development of addiction are the self-medication model and negative reinforcement models; these models have made significant contributions to explaining how addictive behavior is maintained through its function of reducing anxiety, stress, or other negative emotional states (Khantzian, 1997; Baker et al., 2004; Koob & Le Moal, 2008).

Studies in the field of developmental psychopathology show that early life experiences have significant effects on an individual's psychological vulnerabilities in later periods. Childhood traumas, neglect, abuse, insecure attachment experiences, and chronic stress have been

associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, depressive symptoms, and an increased risk of addiction (Bowlby, 1988; Felitti et al., 1998; Khantzian, 1997). However, the fact that individuals exposed to the same adverse life experiences exhibit different psychological outcomes indicates that developmental risks should be evaluated alongside the individual's subsequent cognitive and motivational processes (Russell et al., 2025). In this context, psychological entrapment emerges as an important concept. Entrapment refers to the subjective experience in which an individual feels unable to change their current life circumstances, perceives their options as limited, or cannot find a way out of their situation (Gilbert & Allan, 1998; O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018).

A natural and adaptive aspect of human behavior is the pursuit of answers. People set goals, develop solutions to the problems they face in life, and adjust their tactics as conditions change. Cognitive flexibility, the ability to weigh options, and the ability to modify objectives when needed are characteristics of healthy problem-solving (Martin & Rubin, 1995). But in some situations, this quest for answers may become increasingly focused, and a particular objective may come to be seen as the only way to address the person's issues. This point of change is the specific focus of the Maladaptive Ambition Theory put forth in this article. Maladaptive ambition, according to the theory, is the process by which a natural search for answers, initially intended to overcome psychological entrapment, progressively loses cognitive flexibility and becomes a rigid motivational pattern focused on a single objective. This definition distinguishes between maladaptive ambition and the traditional definition of ambition. Research on motivation has shown that goal orientation and persistence are associated with positive outcomes in a variety of situations (Duckworth et al., 2007). However, when a person becomes overly committed to a particular goal, loses the ability to think

about other options, and the goal becomes essential to their self-regulation, the motivational process can become dysfunctional (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand et al., 2003). Maladaptive Ambition Theory deviates from these viewpoints by contending that the problem is not the amount of ambition but rather its psychological function: the individual initially sets a goal to overcome a challenge, but over time, the goal may become their primary means of escaping their current circumstance.

Addictive behavior may not start out as a direct pursuit of pleasure for some people; instead, it may take on significance as a means of escaping or finding a solution to seemingly intractable problems (Hogarth, 2020). The expectation of a large win in gambling disorder may be linked to the desire to transform one's life or reclaim control in addition to being an economic objective (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014). This theoretical approach is also integrated with the Developmental Layered Pathway Model (DLPM), which was developed by Çakıcı (2026): Maladaptive Ambition Theory offers a complementary mechanism that explains why an individual becomes more and more attached to a particular goal, while the DLPM uses layers of development to explain the development of addiction. Within this same theoretical network, the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive responses to entrapment was later formalized by the Entrapment Response Framework (Çakıcı, 2026a), which situates the motivational fixation described here as one possible outcome of the maladaptive response pathway.

This article's objectives are to describe Maladaptive Ambition as a novel psychological concept, elucidate its theoretical underpinnings, demonstrate how it differs from current notions of motivation and addiction, and provide a foundation for future measurement instruments and empirical studies.

Motivation in Addiction: What Do Current Theories Explain, and Where Do They Fall Short?

Addiction is now seen as a multifaceted process that arises from the mutual interaction of biological predispositions, learning processes, cognitive evaluations, and environmental factors. Theoretical approaches to explaining the development of addictive disorders have grown in recent years (Koob & Volkow, 2016). However, current models are limited in explaining how an individual's initial response to life difficulties gradually evolves into a growing attachment to a particular behavior.

According to Khantzian's (1997) self-medication theory, individuals often use substances or engage in addictive behaviors as a means of regulating highly distressing psychological states; at first, the behavior may be experienced as an attempt at problem-solving by the individual. Similarly, negative reinforcement models show that addictive behaviors are maintained because they reduce negative internal states (Baker et al., 2004; Koob & Le Moal, 2008). While these approaches explain the maintenance mechanisms of the behavior, they do not fully explain why an individual becomes increasingly attached to a particular behavior among many possible solutions.

In the context of gambling disorder, this question is particularly crucial. Near-miss incidents, cognitive distortions, and the delusion of control (Langer, 1975; Clark et al., 2009), escape motivation (Jacobs, 1986), and issues with emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004)

are significant factors in the persistence of gambling behavior (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014; Petry, 2005). Some people find purpose in gambling as a means of improving their situation or making up for past mistakes. Different people may use the same behavior for different psychological purposes; Maladaptive Ambition Theory focuses on the motivational transformation that precedes the behavior itself.

Self-determination theory states that autonomous motivation is associated with more adaptable and flexible outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000); goal systems theory also contends that people can create multiple goals to satisfy a particular need and flexibly switch between them (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Adaptive self-regulation is thought to include the capacity to disengage from an unachievable goal and refocus effort toward alternative goals (Wrosch et al., 2003).

Vallerand and colleagues' (2003) obsessive passion model demonstrates the connection between psychological issues and an uncontrollable attachment to a specific activity. However, this model mostly explains excessive attachment to activities that individuals love or integrate into their identity. In Maladaptive Ambition Theory, what matters is not the activity itself, but the meaning the individual attributes to the goal as a means to resolve their sense of entrapment: in obsessive passion, the main mechanism is "excessive attachment to a beloved activity," while in maladaptive ambition, it is "attachment to a goal perceived as the only way to resolve life problems."

Current models can explain why individuals seek pleasure or avoid negative emotions, but there is a need for a comprehensive model that explains how the search for solutions that begins after adverse developmental experiences and perceived entrapment gradually becomes more rigid. Maladaptive Ambition Theory is proposed not as an explanation for addiction itself, but as an early motivational process that may facilitate the transition to addictive behaviors in some individuals.

Entrapment and the Search for Solutions: The Psychological Groundwork of Maladaptive Ambition

One of the fundamental questions in understanding the development of addictive behaviors is why an individual becomes increasingly attached to a particular behavior over time. Current addiction models explain reward systems, impulse control, and cognitive distortions (Koob & Volkow, 2016), but a more in-depth study of the psychological process that precedes the behavior and directs the individual toward a specific solution is necessary.

The experience of perceived entrapment, a complex psychological state in which the person feels powerless to alter their current circumstances and believes their options for escape are limited, is one of the initial stages of this process, according to the Theory of Maladaptive Ambition. Perceived entrapment has been linked to psychological burden, helplessness, and hopelessness, according to studies conducted since Gilbert and Allan (1998) defined entrapment as the feeling of being stuck in a situation from which one cannot change or escape (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018). However, rather than being limited to feelings of helplessness or escape, the concept of entrapment in the Maladaptive Ambition Theory encompasses a broader psychological process characterized by the conviction that one's current

circumstances are unsustainable and an intense search for ways to change them.

It is incorrect to view entrapment as a directly pathological process. Two adaptive traits of humans are problem-solving and goal-setting; when faced with challenges, the human organism naturally seeks solutions. For instance, someone facing financial difficulties might seek new employment or continue their education to better themselves; the capacity to weigh multiple options and adjust plans of action in response to changing circumstances is essential.

According to Maladaptive Ambition Theory, this is the pivotal moment. Some people prioritize a particular goal over all other options due to extreme stress, developmental traumas, past failures, or a lack of social support. Instead of being merely a task to be completed, the goal now serves as the primary means of escaping the person's trap. Eventually, what was once a "desired achievement" turns into a "necessary escape route." The problem is not that the goal is compelling, but rather that it consumes all of the person's options.

This process is closely linked to the concept of cognitive flexibility, the ability to modify one's goals, attitudes, and behaviors in response to changing circumstances (Martin & Rubin, 1995). According to Hayes et al. (2006), psychological flexibility is the capacity to act in line with one's values in the face of adversity without becoming unduly attached to particular thoughts and feelings. Reducing this flexibility can result in overcommitment to a goal that seemed advantageous at first; the possibility of failure now causes extreme anxiety and a sense of danger, in addition to disappointment. For the individual, escaping their present predicament is more crucial than achieving success.

For instance, some people may view gambling as a means of resolving financial issues, making up for previous losses, or feeling more valuable; in this scenario, gambling is not merely an activity but rather a "solution project." When this project becomes unrealistic, the person might invest even more instead of considering other ways to cope with their losses, because abandoning the goal is seen as both a loss of hope for salvation and a giving up of a behavior (Blażczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014). In fact, increased psychological distress and loss of functioning have been linked to an inability to cognitively disengage from an unachievable goal (Wrosch et al., 2003).

But not all entrapment experiences result in maladaptive ambition; some people can turn difficult life situations into a potent catalyst for change. Therefore, the determining factor is not entrapment per se, but rather the flexibility or rigidity of the subsequent search for solutions. The process can be summed up as follows within this theoretical framework:

Developmental or psychological burdens → Perceived entrapment → Search for solutions → Belief in a single solution (motivational fixation) → Maladaptive ambition

The Maladaptive Ambition Theory's attempt to explain the motivational shift that may occur before addictive behavior manifests is its distinctive contribution.

Maladaptive Ambition Theory: Definition, Core Components, and Psychological Mechanism

In motivational psychology, ambition is generally viewed as a positive trait associated with goal-setting, effort, and the desire for success (Duckworth et al.; Locke and

Latham, 2002, 2007). However, it has also been shown that the same motivational energy does not always lead to adaptive results; in certain situations, it can become an inflexible, uncontrollable pattern that impairs psychological functioning (Vallerand et al., 2003).

Maladaptive Ambition Theory concerns the psychological aspects of ambition and an individual's relationship to their goal. According to the theory, maladaptive ambition is a rigid motivational pattern that develops when a person's search for solutions—designed to overcome psychological entrapment—gradually loses cognitive flexibility, becomes focused on a single goal, and treats that goal as the primary means of escaping their current situation. The transitional stage in this process is the "single solution belief," which arises when a person begins to perceive a particular objective as the only practical way out of their sense of entrapment. The individual's attention, cognitive capacity, and motivational energy become increasingly concentrated on this objective as this belief gains traction—a process known as motivational fixation in the theory. Fundamentally, the problem is not "wanting something intensely," but rather making a single solution feel necessary. In maladaptive ambition, the goal is seen as the only means of escaping present psychological burdens, whereas in healthy ambition, a person can change their approach to a goal and balance it with other aspects of life. Goal systems theory states that having a variety of ways to accomplish goals is crucial for psychological adaptation (Kruglanski et al., 2002); goal-directed behavior becomes more inflexible as options decrease. In terms of a later theoretical extension of this framework, the specific objective around which the individual's solution-seeking rigidifies corresponds to what is termed the privileged solution object (Çakıcı, 2026d), and the question of why one person's fixation centers on achievement while another's centers on gambling or substance use is addressed by that theory's account of solution object differentiation.

Distinguishing Maladaptive Ambition from Healthy Ambition

The main distinction is in the person's psychological adaptability to the goal rather than its magnitude. A person with healthy ambition can set objectives, put in effort, create new avenues in the face of setbacks, maintain other facets of life, and reevaluate objectives when necessary. However, in maladaptive ambition, the goal becomes increasingly central to life; alternatives become less significant; failure results in an even stronger attachment to the goal rather than reevaluation; and the goal may even take center stage in determining one's own value.

This distinction is comparable to the model of obsessive passion (Vallerand et al., 2003), but Maladaptive Ambition Theory places the beginning of the process in a different way: whereas obsessive passion focuses on attachment to the activity itself, maladaptive ambition focuses on the person's goal orientation, which was developed as a way to solve a problem. Because of this, different people may have different motivations for engaging in the same behavior. For example, one person may continue to gamble for excitement, while another may believe that gambling is the only way to avoid financial entrapment.

Core Psychological Components of Maladaptive Ambition

The theory posits five fundamental psychological elements that constitute maladaptive ambition.

Mental Preoccupation

The objective occupies an increasing amount of mental space; the individual continuously considers potential outcomes, imagines future situations, and invests substantial cognitive energy in it. This characteristic is comparable to the idea of preoccupation in the literature on addiction (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Maladaptive Ambition Theory, on the other hand, seeks to explain the motivational underpinnings of behavior before it manifests.

Exclusion of Alternative Solutions

The system of solutions becomes more limited; although the person may at first think of other options, routes other than the particular objective eventually start to seem less desirable. The idea of cognitive flexibility is closely associated with this circumstance (Martin & Rubin, 1995; Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). The main issue with maladaptive ambition is that alternatives become psychologically invisible rather than having a goal.

Risk Taking for the Sake of the Goal

When a goal in life becomes too important, a person may start taking risks they wouldn't normally take. Impulsivity, or the desire for instant gratification, is not the same as this risk-taking behavior. On the other hand, maladaptive ambition involves accepting risks to achieve a long-term goal while underestimating the potential repercussions because the goal is overemphasized. To recover losses from gambling, for instance, one may take progressively greater risks (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014).

Persistent Goal Commitment

Failure in maladaptive ambition paradoxically increases attachment to the goal; rather than thinking "this way may not work," the person is more likely to think "I should try harder." In healthy motivation, failure can lead to a change in strategy. This pattern coincides with challenges in letting go of unachievable objectives (Wrosch et al., 2003) and may also be linked to cognitive consistency processes and an excessive focus on the objective (Festinger, 1957).

Persistence Despite Negative Outcomes

The individual may realize that their efforts toward the goal are causing problems in their life, but the goal's psychological meaning becomes so powerful that it is difficult to reduce or abandon the behavior. This feature is similar to the pattern of persistence despite harmful consequences observed in addictive disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2022); however, from the perspective of Maladaptive Ambition Theory, this is an earlier motivational process that may lay the groundwork for the development of addiction, rather than addiction itself.

Psychological Mechanism of Maladaptive Ambition

Theoretically, the process unfolds as follows:

Psychological entrapment → *Search for solutions* → *Single solution belief / Motivational fixation* → *Maladaptive ambition* → *Maladaptive daydreaming* ⇌ *Maladaptive ambition* → *Behavioral specification* → *Risk of addiction*

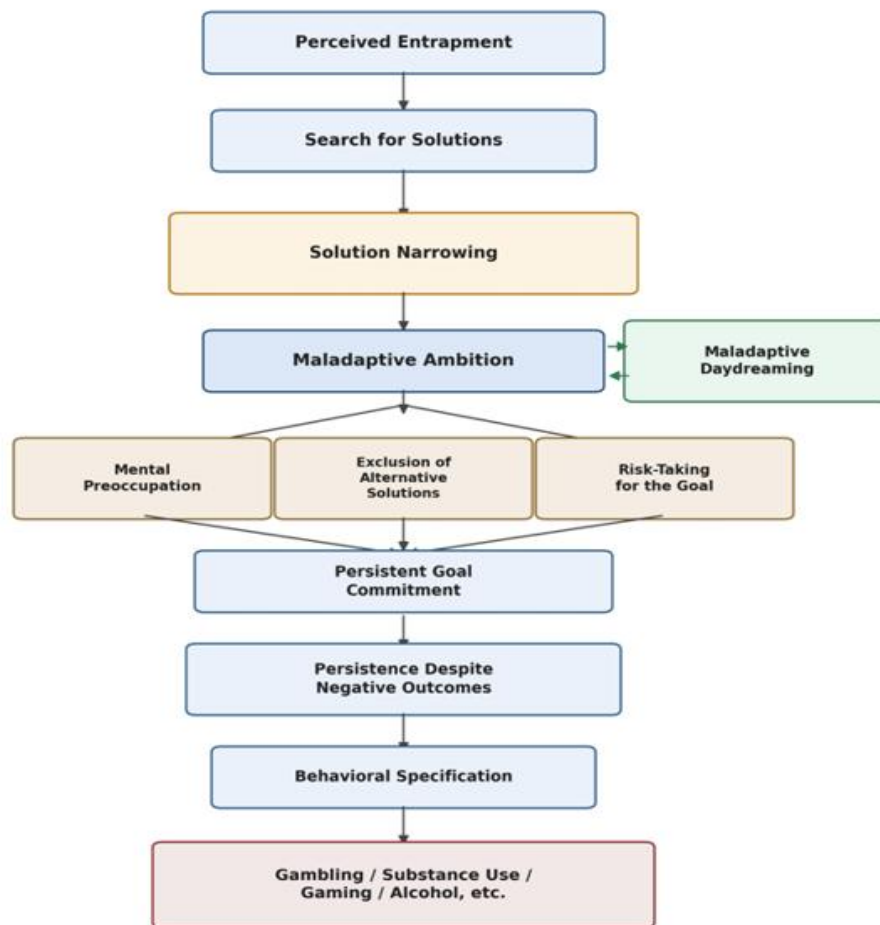


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the psychological mechanism in the Maladaptive Ambition Theory.

In this process, maladaptive ambition is not an outcome but a transitional mechanism. Initially, the individual pursues a goal to change their life; however, as the goal gradually becomes a psychological necessity, the person's behavior begins to organize around it.

Maladaptive Ambition and Maladaptive Daydreaming: A Mutually Reinforcing Motivational System

One of the key components of Maladaptive Ambition Theory is that an individual's motivation toward a goal is organized not only at the behavioral level but also at the cognitive level. A person's goal becomes an important part of their mental world when they begin to see it as the primary means of resolving life's issues. The idea of maladaptive daydreaming is theoretically connected to this process.

Maladaptive daydreaming, according to Somer (2002), is characterized by a person's intense, detailed, repetitive, and difficult-to-control mental fantasies; this process can interfere with day-to-day functioning and take precedence over actual activities. Maladaptive daydreaming may be particularly associated with emotion regulation, escape motivation, and psychological distress, according to subsequent research (Somer et al., Theodor-Katz et al., 2016, 2022).

From the standpoint of Maladaptive Ambition Theory, this process is not merely an escape behavior; the theory suggests that maladaptive daydreaming can also be a domain in which the person maintains their search for answers. In an attempt to break free from entrapment, the person not only pursues the goal behaviorally but also repeatedly enacts it mentally. According to Oettingen (2012), mental simulations of the future are useful when paired with realistic assessment and consideration of the present situation; in maladaptive ambition, on the other hand, these simulations focus solely on a single objective and neglect other options.

Maladaptive ambition and maladaptive daydreaming can now develop a mutually reinforcing relationship: maladaptive daydreaming makes the goal more vivid and psychologically necessary in the mind, while maladaptive ambition increases motivational investment. Expectations regarding gambling behavior can be strengthened by vividly imagining scenarios such as winning big, getting out of debt, or making up for past failures (Toneatto et al., 1997; Clark, 2014). The unique idea of Maladaptive Ambition Theory, however, is that these cognitive distortions are frequently based on an already-existing motivational structure; the person does not become attached to the idea that "I must win" just because they want to win, but rather because they have made winning an overly significant solution to their entrapment.

This relationship should be viewed as a cyclical process rather than a linear cause-and-effect one: as ambition for the goal rises, so do mental scenarios associated with it, and as these scenarios intensify, so does the goal's psychological significance. According to this framework, Maladaptive Ambition Theory views maladaptive daydreaming as a cognitive extension of a maladaptive motivational system under specific circumstances, rather than merely as a means of escape or withdrawal into fantasy.

How Maladaptive Ambition Differs from Similar Concepts

A new psychological concept must both clearly distinguish itself from preexisting concepts and highlight areas of overlap in order to acquire theoretical value. While Maladaptive Ambition Theory shares features with concepts such as high achievement motivation, obsessive passion, impulsivity, craving, and maladaptive daydreaming, it differs in the psychological process it aims to explain.

Maladaptive Ambition vs. Healthy Ambition / Achievement Motivation

Achievement motivation is an important motivational structure that drives individuals to pursue challenging goals, exert effort, and show perseverance (McClelland, 1961; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). From the perspective of Maladaptive Ambition Theory, the problem is not the existence or intensity of ambition: healthy ambition involves both goal commitment and cognitive flexibility, whereas in maladaptive ambition, the individual begins to see a particular goal as the only way out of their psychological entrapment and alternative options lose their significance. In this respect, maladaptive ambition is conceptualized not as "wanting something intensely," but as "wanting because one believes there is no other way."

Maladaptive Ambition and Obsessive Passion

The concept of maladaptive ambition is most similar to the concept of obsessive passion. Vallerand and colleagues (2003) proposed that obsessive passion is characterized by an individual's uncontrollable attachment to a particular activity, which becomes a significant part of their self-worth. Overinvestment, mental obsession, and perseverance in the face of setbacks are characteristics shared by both ideas. But the starting point of the attachment is where the fundamental difference is found. In the Maladaptive Ambition Theory, the process begins with an individual's experience of entrapment and the search for a way out, whereas in the obsessive passion model, it begins with an individual's excessive attachment to an activity they love or value. The person looks for a goal to solve a problem first, and over time, this goal becomes the only perceived solution, rather than first becoming attached to an activity and then having problems.

Maladaptive Ambition, Impulsivity, and Craving

Maladaptive ambition is not the same as impulsivity, which is defined by making snap decisions without fully weighing the consequences and pursuing instant rewards (Whiteside & Lynam, 2001); instead, the process is typically not abrupt. The person considers a goal for a long time and invests in it. A rigid belief that "if I succeed, all my problems will be solved" may be the reason behind the repeated act of gambling to win big, for instance, rather than being purely impulsive.

An intense, transient desire to use a specific substance or partake in a particular behavior is known as a craving (Tiffany & Wray, 2012). Maladaptive ambition, on the other hand, refers to a higher-level motivational system that propels behavior: the person doesn't initially crave the behavior, but over time they develop a strong desire for it because they believe it is the key to solving their problems. Therefore, in certain situations, maladaptive ambition may be a psychological process that precedes craving.

Maladaptive Ambition and Maladaptive Daydreaming

Maladaptive ambition and maladaptive daydreaming are closely related but not the same. Maladaptive daydreaming addresses the question of "What is the individual imagining in their mind?" (Somer, 2002; Somer et al., 2016). Maladaptive ambition, on the other hand, asks "Why is the individual so attached to this goal?" As a result, although the two concepts may complement one another, they function at distinct psychological levels.

When these parallels are taken into account collectively, it is clear that Maladaptive Ambition Theory is a complementary theoretical proposal meant to explain a transitional process that existing concepts of motivation and addiction find difficult to address rather than a model meant to replace them. Because of this, maladaptive ambition is defined as a state in which the cognitive flexibility in the search for solutions is lost, rather than just an excessive form of high motivation.

Testability of Maladaptive Ambition Theory and Directions for Future Research

A conceptual explanation alone is insufficient for newly developed psychological theories to have scientific value; the theory's fundamental assumptions must also be quantifiable, verifiable, and amenable to evaluation through various research methods. Maladaptive Ambition Theory proposes measuring not the individual's general motivational capacity, but rather the point at which their relationship with a goal loses flexibility and becomes a rigid psychological pattern. The primary aim of a future Maladaptive Ambition Scale should not be to assess "how ambitious a person is," but rather to evaluate "under what conditions ambition turns into the sole psychological tool for solving problems in the individual's life."

Psychological entrapment is not pathological by itself; it naturally triggers a search for solutions. The entrapment literature shows that feeling trapped in an inescapable situation is associated with psychological risks (Gilbert & Allan, 1998), but from the perspective of Maladaptive Ambition Theory, entrapment is the starting point for the search for solutions.

Single solution belief / motivational fixation is a mediating mechanism between developmental risk factors (Felitti et al., 1998; Khantzian, 1997) and addictive behaviors: developmental adverse experiences → psychological vulnerability → entrapment → search for solutions → fixation → maladaptive ambition → behavior-specific addiction process. This model can be tested with structural equation modeling and longitudinal studies. Perceiving the goal as the only solution, devaluing alternatives, persistence in the face of setbacks, and the ability to disengage from the goal are among the characteristics to be measured (Wrosch et al., 2003) and are suitable criteria for comparison. Maladaptive ambition and maladaptive daydreaming have a cyclical rather than linear relationship. This bidirectional effect can be tested independently, and it can be investigated whether the combination of both constructs better explains addiction symptoms.

The theory is process-oriented rather than behavior-specific, even though it was first presented in the context of gambling disorder (Clark, 2014; Petry, 2005). It may also be studied in other contexts, such as substance use disorders, internet use disorder, digital gaming addiction, and shopping addiction. Priority research directions

include the creation and validation of a Maladaptive Ambition Scale, along with concurrent validity analyses using recognized measures of cognitive flexibility (Martin & Rubin, 1995) and goal disengagement and re-engagement (Wrosch et al., 2003), as well as cross-cultural research, longitudinal studies, and comparisons between clinical and non-clinical samples.

Taken as a whole, this research agenda suggests that Maladaptive Ambition Theory offers a testable model for explaining a change in motivation that occurs before addictive behavior manifests. The theory's main contribution is its focus on the reasons behind an individual's behavior and on their perception of that behavior as the primary means of solving their problems.

Clinical Implications of Maladaptive Ambition Theory

Reducing or eliminating the addictive behavior is one of the primary objectives of treatment for addictive disorders. Modern approaches to addiction, however, stress that deeper psychological processes frequently underlie the behavior itself; therefore, a thorough clinical evaluation should address more than just the question, "Why does the individual continue this behavior?" but also "What is the psychological purpose of this behavior in the person's life?" (Koob & Volkow, 2016; Khantzian, 1997).

Maladaptive Ambition Theory suggests that addictive behavior could be a rigidized version of a quest for answers created to alleviate a person's psychological entrapment. Consequently, for some people, the behavior becomes a "solution symbol" with connotations such as financial salvation, making up for losses, or regaining control. It is beneficial to ask more than just "Why do you gamble?" during clinical interviews. But also "What issue will you be able to resolve with this behavior?" and "How else might you be able to make this change?" These inquiries help elucidate the underlying motivational system of the behavior. If interventions focus only on eliminating the behavior, the underlying need for answers goes unmet, and the person may resort to another behavior to satisfy that need.

The narrowing of the solution system is the central characteristic of maladaptive ambition, according to the theory; cognitive markers of this state include ideas like "I have no other option." Training in problem-solving techniques and cognitive restructuring (Beck et al., 1993), as well as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy interventions based on psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006), provide methods that support this approach. Instead of lowering motivation, the goal of treatment is to encourage the progressive disengagement from unachievable goals and the creation of new ones (Wrosch et al., 2003); the idea is to encourage the question, "What other ways might bring about change?" rather than to say, "give up this goal."

When combined with the delusion of control, the idea of a "big win" in gambling disorder is often more than just a financial expectation; it encourages the behavior to persist (Clark, 2014; Petry, 2005). This raises the question: "What fundamental problem will be solved if you win?" The objective is to make the goal system more flexible rather than to obstruct goals because, from a preventive perspective, individuals who are constantly stuck and unable to see other options may be at risk (Martin & Rubin, 1995; Hayes et al., 2006).

The Developmental Layered Pathway Model (DLPM) and Maladaptive Ambition Theory are complementary mechanisms. Maladaptive Ambition Theory seeks to explain why an individual may turn away from alternative solutions during this process and why they invest more and more in a specific goal, whereas the DLPM explains the developmental pathways leading to addiction. According to Maladaptive Ambition Theory, addictive behaviors should not only be seen as a loss of control or reward seeking, but also as the progressive rigidification of attempts to solve life's problems. In addition to altering the behavior itself during treatment, this method offers an alternative perspective to reorganize the underlying system of solutions.

Maladaptive Ambition Theory: A General Theory of Motivation Beyond Addiction?

This article develops the Maladaptive Ambition Theory in relation to gambling disorder, mainly because the idea of a "single big win" in gambling readily reveals motivational rigidity. However, the proposed mechanism is not unique to gambling behavior; it could be applied as a more general motivational model to explain how a person's system for generating solutions becomes rigidified around a single goal in any area of life.

Although motivational psychology has long examined the reasons behind goal-setting and the impact of motivation on performance (Locke & Latham, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000), the question of when motivation becomes a psychopathological organization and ceases to be beneficial has received less attention. This gap is intended to be filled by Maladaptive Ambition Theory, which holds that the pathological form of motivation results from a loss of flexibility rather than from its intensity. High levels of dedication to a goal are not inherently problematic; rather, the issue arises when the person no longer perceives a psychologically viable alternative.

There are many similarities between this method and research on psychological resilience. Resilient people are strong, but they can also adapt to changing conditions and adjust their objectives as needed (Masten, 2014; Bonanno, 2004). Maladaptive ambition and psychological resilience may therefore be two extremes of a single motivational system, with rigid motivation at one end and flexible motivation at the other. This framework is also consistent with the developmental vulnerability layers of the DLPM: a person's ability to generate alternative solutions may be hampered by diminished cognitive flexibility and weakened internal psychological resources, which may lead to the emergence of maladaptive ambition.

From a decision-making psychology standpoint, the theory also provides an explanation. According to Maladaptive Ambition Theory, there is only one psychologically feasible option at advanced stages, so a person is no longer actually making a decision. Conventional decision-making models, on the other hand, assume that people weigh their options and select the best one. Therefore, from the standpoint of the person's internal motivational system, a behavior that appears illogical from the outside is seen as necessary and inevitable.

This claim of generalizability strengthens the theory, but it should be carefully considered. To find out if the same mechanism applies to substance addictions, compulsive shopping, problematic investment behaviors, or excessively goal-focused lifestyles, different tests should

be carried out. In this way, Maladaptive Ambition Theory goes beyond an addiction psychology-specific model to provide a general framework that explains when motivation stops being an adaptive force and becomes a restrictive organization. When the fixated goal itself belongs to a socially valued domain, such as excessive achievement or status pursuit, the resulting rigidity may remain outwardly indistinguishable from healthy striving; this possibility is elaborated by Adaptive-Appearing Maladaptation Theory (Çakıcı, 2026c), while the regulatory quality that determines whether such goal-directed responses ultimately resolve toward genuine adaptation or toward this disguised maladaptation is specified by Compensatory Adaptation Theory (Çakıcı, 2026b).

Discussion

This article's Maladaptive Ambition Theory provides a fresh conceptual framework for understanding the motivational mechanisms underlying the emergence of addictive behaviors. Although current models of addiction focus on reward systems, impulse control issues, and cognitive distortions (Koob & Volkow, 2016; Potenza, 2014), they only partially explain how a person's experience of entrapment eventually becomes a rigid motivational structure. While self-medication (Khantzian, 1997) and negative reinforcement models (Baker et al., 2004; Koob & Le Moal, 2008) help explain how addictive behavior is maintained, Maladaptive Ambition Theory highlights an earlier motivational process that precedes the emergence of the behavior itself. In certain individuals, the tendency toward addiction may not be directly related to the behavior itself, but rather to a search for solutions—initiated to escape entrapment—that eventually becomes rigid around a single goal.

The theory makes a substantial contribution by conceptualizing ambition as a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a fixed personality trait. This assumption is supported by the concepts of cognitive flexibility (Martin & Rubin, 1995) and psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006). This framework also helps explain why individuals exposed to similar unfavorable life circumstances (Felitti et al., 1998) may exhibit different outcomes; variation in the capacity to disengage from unachievable goals (Wrosch et al., 2003) may serve as a moderating factor in the development of maladaptive ambition.

In this regard, the theory is complementary to the previously presented Developmental Layered Pathway Model (DLPM). The DLPM explains the developmental pathways through which a person may develop an addiction, whereas Maladaptive Ambition Theory seeks to explain why, during this process, a person becomes increasingly invested in a particular goal and increasingly distant from alternative solutions.

The theory's ability to explain gambling disorder is particularly significant because, although near-miss experiences, escape motivation, and the illusion of control all play a part (Çakıcı, et al., 2021; Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014), some people find meaning in gambling as a means of altering their circumstances. Additionally, the theory emphasizes that maladaptive daydreaming (Somer, 2002; Somer et al., 2016) is more than just an escape; it can also be a process that psychologically makes the objective more significant. However, because the

theory is new, empirical research is needed to demonstrate its validity and distinguish it from related concepts such as impulsivity, obsessive passion, and achievement motivation.

When considered collectively, this discussion demonstrates that Maladaptive Ambition Theory explains the circumstances in which the attempt to resolve life's challenges becomes a rigid and dysfunctional motivational pattern, rather than explaining the emergence of addictive behaviors exclusively through reward-seeking, impulsivity, or loss of control.

Conclusion

This article's Maladaptive Ambition Theory provides a fresh conceptual framework for understanding how a person's quest for answers in the face of psychological and developmental challenges can turn into a maladaptive motivational pattern. The theory's central tenet is that ambition by itself is neither pathological nor problematic; rather, it can become rigidly focused on a single objective and lose cognitive flexibility when paired with psychological entrapment.

The theory states that a person may eventually feel trapped as a result of traumatic events, ongoing stressors, or unresolved psychological conflicts. This entrapment naturally prompts the person to look for solutions; at first, this process is adaptive. However, for some people, the search for answers may progressively narrow, and a specific objective may begin to be seen as the main way out of entrapment due to severe psychological pressure, repeated failure experiences, or a lack of coping mechanisms. Cognitive flexibility declines as motivation for the goal increases; the individual may start taking more chances toward the goal and continue in the same direction despite unfavorable outcomes.

A key contribution of the theory is its insistence that addictive behaviors cannot be fully accounted for simply by maintenance mechanisms after the behavior has emerged, but also necessitates a consideration of the motivational transformations that occur beforehand. For some, gambling behavior may be driven by more than the anticipation of financial gain; it may serve as a means to alter one's life, bounce back from previous losses, or regain a feeling of control (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Clark, 2014; Petry, 2005). Thus, to understand gambling behavior, it is necessary to assess the psychological meanings the individual assigns to it.

This theoretical approach provides a more comprehensive explanation of the development of addiction when combined with the DLPM. Maladaptive Ambition Theory aims to conceptualize a crucial intermediate stage in the

transition from developmental risks to behavioral addiction.

Maladaptive Ambition Theory needs empirical research, though, as it is still a young theory. In the future, developing a Maladaptive Ambition Scale and examining the relationships among psychological resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003), perceived entrapment, maladaptive daydreaming, problems with emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility (Martin & Rubin, 1995), psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006), and goal disengagement and reengagement (Wrosch et al., 2003), and addiction symptoms will strengthen the scientific foundation of the theory.

In summary, Maladaptive Ambition Theory looks at addictive behaviors in terms of reward seeking, loss of control, and how a person's efforts to overcome life's challenges may eventually become rigid. The main thesis of the theory is that the loss of flexibility in the search for solutions, which results in dependence on a single goal, may be a major psychological shift on the path to addiction. In this sense, Maladaptive Ambition Theory provides a fresh framework for understanding the developmental and motivational causes of addiction; it seeks to clarify the situations in which a person's search for answers turns into a rigid psychological system that feeds the addiction process rather than a therapeutic force.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethics committee approval was not required for this study, as the study did not involve human participants, human data, or interventions requiring ethical approval. The study was conducted in accordance with applicable ethical standards and institutional guidelines.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

MÇ is the sole author of this theoretical article and was solely responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, theoretical development, and writing of the manuscript. MÇ read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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