Lines in the Sand: Using Category Widths to Define and Pursue Self-Control Goals

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One aspect of defining self-control goals is to create categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent alternatives. In one pretest and two lab studies, we show that the widths of individuals’ categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent alternatives are strategically used to guide behavior. For both indulgence and restriction goals, high self-control individuals create narrower categories of goal-consistent and broader categories of goal-inconsistent alternatives than do low self-control individuals. Finally, while low self-control consumers tend to use goal-related categorizations to guide assortment choices, high self-control consumers compose assortments in keeping with their trait self-control. Based on these findings, we offer suggestions for helping individuals to use categories more effectively in pursuit of self-control goals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Much of the recent media attention on issues such as obesity in children and adults (Brownell and Yach 2005), rising bankruptcies caused by overextension of credit (Fetterman 2005), and the lack of savings by Americans (Colvin 2005), focuses on individuals’ inability to regulate their own behavior. That is, many people seem to repeatedly give in to temptations in an impulsive manner (Baumeister 2002). While this lack of control may well account for many societal ills, lack of control alone does not tell the full story. Rather, failure to properly categorize alternatives is likely a contributing factor to the problems associated with such issues as obesity and consumer debt. In fact, the road to addressing many of the dark issues associated with today’s society begins with individual consumers setting goals and creating plans to achieve those goals. One of the first steps in creating such plans is to define the category of goal-consistent options and behaviors. For example, a consumer embarking on a dieting plan needs to determine if buying a McDonald’s hamburger should be categorized as a goal-consistent alternative or not. Similarly, a consumer creating a plan to reduce personal debt will need to determine if “buying groceries” using credit should be categorized as an acceptable or unacceptable expenditure that constitutes an acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Ill-defined plans in this early categorization phase can contribute to self-control failure in a variety of consumption domains.

Categorization theory provides insight into the ways that individuals define and group stimuli in their environment. However, despite the realization that self-control goals are contingent upon delineation of target behaviors and outcomes (Gollwitzer 2003), little research has focused on the goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent option categorization process as it relates to goal pursuit. Specifically, category width has long been viewed as an individual difference factor (Huang 1981; Pettigrew 1958), such that individuals are chronically either broad or narrow categorizers of various stimuli in their environments. In this tradition, neither goals nor beliefs about one’s own self-control ability should normatively impact the way in which a given set of options is categorized. More recent research has demonstrated that category width can be altered by situational factors (Ülkümen, Gulden, Vicki Morwitz and Amitav Chakravarti 2006).

In the present research, we are primarily interested in exploring the relationship between self-control goals, individuals’ perceptions of their ability to meet self-control goals, and the widths of their categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent alternatives. Importantly, we are interested in the ways that categories of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent options are subjectively defined by individuals. Options included in the goal-consistent category are, conceptually, those alternatives the individual feels will facilitate the accomplishment of her/his goal(s). On the contrary, goal-inconsistent options are potential choices that hamper efforts toward goal achievement, based on the individual’s interpretation. Our research illuminates issues involving category construction and self-control by showing that variation in the construction of goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent option categories can be explained by examining individuals’ trait level self-control as well as their particular consumption goals. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the construction of these categories can differentially impact subsequent choice behavior.

REFERENCES


Colvin, Geoffrey (2005), “We’re a Nation Helpless to Save Ourselves,” Fortune, April 4, 2005, 151 (8), 52.


