The Dilution Model: How Additional Goals Undermine the Perceived Effectiveness of a Common Means

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Four experiments tested for a dilution model of goal pursuit. We propose that an increase in the number of goals a single means can satisfy weakens the associative strength between that means and each individual goal and thus lowers the perceived effectiveness of means for the attainment of each goal. Accordingly, our studies illustrated this dilution effect and found that the degree of reduction in means instrumentality depends on the perceived distinctiveness between the goals. Furthermore, means that are connected with multiple goals are less preferred when a single goal needs to be fulfilled because of the dilution effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Goals are attained through various means (i.e., an object, an action, or a place) connected to it by functional associations. For example, one may go to a café to get coffee and to get lunch. A question that arises is how learning that this café shop serves sandwich in addition to coffee would influence one’s judgment of the coffee that it serves, and the subsequent decision to buy coffee here when sandwich is not desired. More generally, this article considers the question of how adding more goals to a given means affects the individuals’ motivation to employ it when only one of these goals is activated.

Based on the goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al. 2002), we propose a dilution model of goal pursuit, and suggest that the perceived effectiveness of a given means to goal attainment, and the resulting motivation to pursue it, are determined by the strength of the association between the means and the goal, with stronger associations leading to higher perceived instrumentality. Because an efficient means is likely to be used a great deal, and hence come to be strongly associated with the goal, individuals may assume that the opposite direction of causality also holds and that a greater association of a means to a goal attest to greater efficacy.

According to this model, the associative strength between a goal and a means, and the resulting motivation to pursue the means, are determined by several factors. First, it depends on the number and frequency of instances in which the two entities (the goal and the means) have appeared together in the past. A stronger association between a means and a goal is expected if they have appeared together frequently. Second, the means-goal associative strength may depend on the uniqueness of the association, that is, on the number of additional means related to the goal or the number of additional goals related to the means. According to a spreading activation model (Anderson 1983; Anderson and Bower 1973), as the number of associations attached to a mental construct increases, each association becomes weaker, as demonstrated by a lower retrieval rate of the target when the central construct is activated. Similarly, it is plausible to hypothesize that adding more goals to a given means dilutes the means-goal association, and this dilution might reduce the perceived effectiveness of the means with respect to the goal. Third, the strength of the means-goal association may further depend on the extent to which the goals simultaneously connected to certain means differ from each other. The more distinctively different goals are believed to be, the stronger their tendency to undermine each others’ association with the common means. When a single means is assumed to satisfy multiple distinctive goals, it might therefore be seen as less effective in satisfying each of these goals, because of the weakened degree of association between the means and each goal.

The aforementioned predictions were tested in four experimental studies. Specifically, Study 1 tested the general hypothesis that an increase in goal number decreases the perceived effectiveness of the means for any specific goal attainment. This study found that when participants listed one goal that certain means satisfied, the means were judged to be more effective for the attainment of the original goal than when they listed three goals that the means satisfied. Study 2 tested whether perceived goal distinctiveness moderates the degree of the dilution effect, and illustrated that, for the same two goals, participants who elaborated on how the two goals were similar perceived the means to be more effective for serving both goals than participants who elaborated on how the two goals were different. This study demonstrated that the dilution of means-goal associative strength depends on the distinctiveness between goals. Study 3 manipulated the strength of the association between the means and one goal, and tested whether the change in associative strength between the means with one goal impact the perceived effectiveness of the means for an alternative goal connected with the means. In this study, strengthening means-goal association subliminally by pair them together in a sequential prime task made participants believe the means was more effective for serving this goal, but was less effective in satisfying an alternative goal that was also served by the means. Finally, Study 4 used a behavioral measure and examined whether the dilution-induced changes in perceived effectiveness correspond to changes in preference for certain means in actual choice. This study found that when a single means served two (vs. one) goals, it was less likely to be chosen as a means for an activated goal than when it served this activated goal only.

Taken together, these studies provided empirical evidence for a dilution model of goal pursuit, whereby adding goals to a single means reduces the perception of its instrumentality with respect to the original goal. Several specific hypotheses followed from the model were tested in the current research: First, adding more goals to a single means renders this means less instrumental for the attainment of each individual goal. Second, the degree of reduction in instrumentality depends on the perceived distinctiveness of the goals connected to a single means, with more distinctive goals having greater impact on the perceived effectiveness of means. Third, the degree of reduction in instrumentality is directly related to the reduction in associative strength between a goal and a means. Fourth, means that are associated with multiple goals are less likely to be chosen and pursued in the course of self-regulation toward any particular goal.

REFERENCES


