Affect As a Cue For Goal Conflict Resolution

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We propose two distinctive affect-based self regulatory systems. One is of concrete affect (e.g., happiness, sadness) and cues the pursuit of short term goals. The second is of abstract affect (e.g., pride, guilt) and cues the pursuit of long-term goals. We demonstrate that the same action can be experienced as negative or positive, depending on whether one focuses on its short term or long term goal. We further show the motivational consequences of these two systems for goal conflict situations. Priming abstract vs. concrete affective terms influences self control, such that priming pride vs. happiness generates more self control.

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ments 1 and 2 by demonstrating that the effect of regulatory orientation on self control is mediated by increased positive goal-related thoughts. Undergraduate participants primed with a prevention (vs. promotion) focus using a mouse maze task also were more likely to stay focused on their goal (i.e., studying) rather than yield to temptation (i.e., taking a break with friends), even though they indicated that they would value taking the break more than promotion-primed participants. Furthermore, the results showed that positive goal-related thoughts mediated the effect of regulatory focus on choice. A thought listing task showed that goal-related thoughts were more accessible and came to mind sooner than temptation-related thoughts among the prevention- vs. promotion-oriented participants. In addition, prevention- versus promotion-oriented participants reported more regret in case of goal pursuit failure, but indicated no difference in how they felt if they were to forego the temptation. Finally, experiment 4 employed a actual choice measure and found that diet-primed prevention- vs. promotion-focused participants were more likely to choose the goal-compatible target (low fat pretzels) over the goal-conflicting temptation target (potato chips).

Taken together, these studies provide convergent evidence that self-regulatory focus influences self-control in that prevention focus leads to greater self control. People with a prevention orientation are more focused on the goal and less focused on temptations relative to those with a promotion orientation. Our results show that prevention-focused participants favored goal-related products more, have more positive goal-related thoughts, and express deeper regret in case of goal failure.

“Affect as a Cue for Self Control”
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Is the good feeling after having a rich and delicious chocolate cake the same as the good feeling after successfully restraining oneself from having fatty food while on a diet? Past research and theory on motivation and emotion commonly share the assumption that goal attainment is marked by positive affect and that part of the reason that people engage in goal related behavior is because they want to feel good (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1997). We believe that the role of affective processes in goal pursuit is more complex and propose that the relationship between positive affect and goal attainment depends on the type of goal that is being pursued. In particular, we focus on self-control dilemmas, posing a conflict between two goals; one that has short-term benefits and another that offers long-term benefits. We propose that the attainment of both short-term goals and long-term goals is associated with positive affect. However, the quality of this affect differs for these two types of goals such that short-term goals are associated with low-level affect (e.g., happiness) and long-term goals are associated with high-level affect (e.g., pride).

Emotion researchers typically identify affective responses with low-level, concrete processing and contrast them with cognitive responses, which are considered to be more abstract, high-level (Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). We suggest a different distinction between high vs. low level of emotions, according to which higher-level emotions are those that follow the attainment of long-term goals, whereas lower-level emotions are the outcome of the attainment of more immediate goals. We further suggest that because an association is established between specific affect and goals, affect becomes a cue for the pursuit of the corresponding goal, such that high-level affect motivates the pursuit of long-term goals and low-level affect motivates the pursuit of short-term temptations.

We present data in support of two predictions of our model regarding the role of affect in self control. The first prediction of our model is that high-level affect is associated with long-term goals and low-level affect is associated with more short-term goals or temptations. In support of this prediction, participants expected a chocolate cake (representing a short-term desire) to make them feel more happy than proud. At the same time, participants expected a vegetable salad (representing the means of a long-term goal) to make them feel more proud than happy (Study 1). The first prediction of our model also implies that the same action should lead to different affective experiences when considered from the near (making the temptation more salient) and from the distance (making the long-term goal more salient). In Study 2, participants with an accessible health goal who chose chocolate over baby carrots, reported feeling more happy than proud while eating the chocolate than while evaluating their choice later on. However, those who chose baby carrots over a chocolate bar reported feeling more proud than happy after a while than while having the carrots.

Finally, our model suggests that these two affective systems have motivational consequences for situations in which long term goals conflict with more specific, short term goals, like in self control dilemmas. We propose that since people associate actions with specific types of affect, this affect serves as a cue for engaging in an action that would result in the equivalent experience. Thus, we propose that low-level affective cues motivate succumbing to temptations whereas high-level affective cues motivate adhering to long term goals. Support for this prediction comes from two studies. In Study 3, participants with an accessible achievement goal were primed with either positive high level affective terms (e.g., pride, self-worth) or positive low level affective terms (e.g., happiness, pleasure) via a lexical decision task. We then measured the time they spent on completing a difficult verbal reasoning test. We found that participants who were primed with high-level affective terms exercised more self control by persisting longer on a difficult task than participants who were primed with low-level affective terms. Study 4 found similar results using a different self control measure. In this study participants with an accessible health goal were primed with positive high level affective terms or positive low level affective terms using the same lexical decision task as in Study 3. We then measured participants’ ability to resist temptation by means of the number of chocolates they chose from a bowl of chocolates. Here, again, participants who were primed with high-level affect exerted more self control by taking less chocolate than those who were primed with low-level affect.

Taken together, our findings support the existence of two distinct affective systems in self regulation and demonstrate its implication to self control dilemmas. We show that low level, hedonic emotions are associated with short-term goals whereas high-level, self conscious emotions are associated with long-term goals. These associations have consequences for behavior such that high-level affect cues self control and low-level affect cues succumbing to temptations. We believe that the proposed model sheds light on the complex and unique functions of emotions as self regulatory feedback for goal pursuit.

“Self-control, Depletion and Choice”
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Jing Wang, Yale University
Ravi Dhar, Yale University
Roy Baumeister, Florida State University

Recent research by Baumeister and colleagues has revealed that individuals have a limited pool of resources available for exerting self-control (Baumeister 1998). One important task that