Automatic Evaluations and Self-Control

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We examine the relationship between automatic goal activation, automatic evaluation toward diet goals and temptation both before and during exposure to a temptation. In addition, we measure consumption of the temptation when participants are under a low or high cognitive load. We find that participants who activate a diet goal during exposure to a temptation have an automatic positive evaluation of the diet goal and that the cognitive load manipulation does not affect their consumption. While these participants had an automatic positive evaluation of the temptation before being exposed to it, during exposure their automatic evaluation was neutral. Participants who did not automatically activate a diet goal during exposure to the temptation did not have an automatic positive evaluation of the goal; however they did have an automatic positive evaluation of the temptation and there was a significant positive correlation between the strength of the automatic evaluation and consumption of the temptation.

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In a third experiment, the predictive validity of participants’ automatic evaluation of the goal to be thin versus their automatic evaluation of a tempting food was examined. Participants were told that they would be sampling either a tempting or non-tempting snack. They then completed an implicit attitude measure (toward the goal as well as the tempting food). They then sampled the snack, and the amount they ate was measured. Participants’ automatic evaluation of the goal significantly predicted how much of the tempting snack they ate (but not the non-tempting snack), while their automatic evaluation of the tempting food did not.

Together, this set of findings extends the work showing that automatic evaluative processes play an important role in goal pursuit and self-regulation (e.g., Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). In particular, they suggest that automatic evaluations of abstract, desirable end-states possess predictive validity for goal relevant behavior, more so possibly than explicit attitudes, explicitly measured goal commitment, and automatic evaluations of concrete, goal-relevant objects.

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Research on implicit motivation has shown that the activation of a goal automatically increases the positivity of automatic evaluations towards objects useful in attaining that goal (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). In addition, Custers and Aarts (2005) find that creating automatic positive evaluations of a goal enhances the motivation to achieve the goal i.e. a positive automatic evaluation towards a goal “pushes” you to succeed. However, in the context of a self-control dilemma, it is unclear whether a strong positive automatic evaluation of a long-term goal guarantees successful self-control. Thus, the role that implicit motivation might play in terms of the self-control process is the central focus of the research described below.

A secondary focus of this research is to examine the mechanism underlying self-control. Traditionally, the process underlying self-control process has been thought of as a controlled process (e.g. Baumeister, Heatherton and Tice, 1994; Muraven and Baumeister, 2000; Trope & Fishbach, 2000). Recent research, however, finds that pursuing goals does not always involve deliberate, conscious intention (see the auto-motive model by Bargh, 1990). Applying this to self-control, the process that underlies successful self-control need not always be controlled. In support of this concept, Fishbach, Friedman and Kruglanski (2003) have shown that exposure to short-term temptations may automatically activate one’s long-term goals and consequently prevent these temptations from influencing one’s behaviour. However, in a previous experiment, we found that although restrained eaters with automatic goal activation prior to exposure to a temptation were able to resist a temptation under low cognitive load, they nevertheless succumb to temptation when placed under high cognitive load (Walsh and Mitchell, 2006). While these results are intriguing, we do not know whether they hold when goal activation is measured while exposed to an actual temptation. Said differently, will individuals who automatically activate the goal during exposure to a real temptation also succumb to temptation when placed under high cognitive load.

In order to tackle the research issues outlined above, we designed two experiments that incorporate both theoretical approaches (i.e. implicit motivation and goal activation) to better understand the self-control process. Rather than focusing on more general temptations and goals, we focus on a specific self-control dilemma among restrained eaters the ability to resist fattening foods. In the first study, we measure goal-temptation associations and automatic evaluations of both goals and temptations before exposure to a real temptation, and then again while participants are exposed to a real temptation—mini-chocolate chip cookies. Participants were then left alone in the room with the cookies for approximately 2 minutes under either low or high cognitive load. The main dependent measure was the amount of cookies each participant consumed under the two cognitive load conditions.

Interestingly, we found differences in terms of goal activation before and during exposure. In fact, we classified restrained eaters on 2 dimensions: whether they activate the goal before exposure (or not), and the whether they activate the goal during exposure (or not). Under low cognitive load, restrained eaters with goal activation (regardless of whether the goal activation occurred before or during exposure), are better equipped to deal with temptations as shown through their consumption patterns, relative to the individuals without activation, suggesting that goal activation facilitates self-control. Under high cognitive load, restrained eaters who automatically activate the goal during exposure do not succumb to temptation when placed under high cognitive load, suggesting that temptations are capable activating an automatic self-control process. However, individuals who do not show goal activation before or during exposure consume the same regardless of load. And individuals who automatically activate the goal before, but not during exposure, consume much more under high cognitive load. These individuals seem to inhibit the diet goal when faced with a temptation.

In terms of automatic evaluations, all restrained eaters have strong positive automatic evaluations of cookies before exposure to the real temptation. The interesting theoretical question is whether these evaluations change when measured during exposure to the temptation. Interestingly, the individuals who automatically activate the diet goal while exposed to a temptation no longer have a positive automatic evaluation towards the temptation during exposure—the evaluations become neutral. We also found a positive relationship between the automatic evaluation of cookies and consumption among those who do not automatically activate the diet goal. In terms of automatic evaluations towards dieting, only those who show goal activation before exposure automatically evaluate diet as positive before exposure. Similarly, only those who activate the goal during exposure to the temptation have an automatic positive evaluation of the goal during exposure. Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between consumption and automatic evaluations of diet.

In a second study, we again measure goal-temptation associations and automatic evaluations of goals and temptations before and during exposure to a real temptation (e.g. tray of mini-chocolate chip cookies). This time we measured moment-to-moment tracking of their approach and avoidance reactions to a temptation i.e. we elicited spontaneous reactions to the cookies via a joystick that recorded evaluation every second. We found that over time, individuals who activate the goal during exposure neither avoid nor approach the temptation. Restrained eaters who inhibited the diet goal when faced with a temptation, however, initially approach the temptation, but over time, they begin to strongly avoid the temptation. Finally, those who never activate the diet goal mainly approach the temptation; over time, they begin to lose the approach, but never to the point where they avoid the temptation.

The present research makes important contributions to the literature. We find that individuals who automatically activate a long-term goal while exposed to a real temptation activate an automatic self-control process. We also show that activation of a goal automatically decreases the positivity of automatic evaluations towards objects not useful in attaining that goal. We interpret
this to suggest that the self-control process is one that modifies the evaluation of the temptation. Further, individuals who automatically activate the diet goal before exposure, but not during exposure, succumb to temptation when placed under high cognitive load, suggesting that exposure to real cookies inhibit the diet goal among these individuals. Cognitive resources are required in order for these individual to convince themselves that the temptation is not appealing, which will then lead to successful self-control.
SESSION OVERVIEW

It is well known that people have lay or implicit theories—informal theories about different phenomena, often not based on any scientific evidence. One such category of implicit theories is the theory that people have about how likely something is to change. Research in social and developmental psychology by Dweck and her associates (see Dweck 1999 for a review) has posited that everyone holds a theory, with varying magnitude, on the extent to which their traits are likely to change, which they term “self-theories”. For example, those with an entity theory of personality believe that personality consists of fixed, static traits and people are inherently made in a certain way that cannot be changed. On the other hand, those with an incremental theory of personality believe that personality consists of dynamic personal qualities that can be changed and developed. A number of studies by Dweck and her associates have shown that entity theorists hold attitudes that are relatively rigid and are more likely to make stereotypical judgments from limited information. In contrast, incremental theorists, who believe that people’s behavior is not static, hold attitudes that are relatively malleable and are much less prone to making stereotypical final judgments and instead base their evaluations on a variety of available information (Erdley and Dweck 1993). Dweck posits that entity or incremental theories can be held for any trait pertaining to the self—personality, intelligence, social skills, etc.

It can be easily seen how people could have an incremental or entity theory about variables that are of interest to marketers and have significant implications for consumer behavior. For example, one may have an incremental or entity theory about how likely a salesperson’s personality is to change, to what extent a particular brand’s traits can be extended to other products, how likely a particular product category is to change what it claims to (e.g., weight loss programs, hair growth formulas, memory-enhancing supplements), and so on. These are just some examples of consumer behavior research in a domain that the larger marketing community has had limited exposure to. While implicit theories can play a major role in consumer behavior, research pertaining to the concept is only beginning in our area.

The objective of this proposed special session is three-fold. First, it will provide a forum for consumer behavior researchers to be exposed to the richness of the research on implicit theories, specifically self-theories—a domain that is yet to be tapped in the consumer behavior literature. This will be accomplished to a large extent by the first presenter, complemented by the next two presenters. Second, it intends to highlight the relevance and implications of self-theories in consumer behavior. This will be done through two presentations that will present research examining the role of self-theories in two quite different consumption contexts—the first on perception of salespeople and the second on acceptance of brand extensions. Third, the most valuable objective of this session is to kindle interest and encourage consumer behavior research involving self-theories. With the exception of Flaherty and Pappas (2000), to our knowledge, there is no current published research in marketing that has addressed self-theories. Therefore, the content of this session will be novel and informative to the conference audience. All three presentations have been chosen such that they are based on research at the completion or near-completion stage (working manuscripts will be made available). The first presentation is based on thirty years of published and unpublished research; the second and the third presentations are each based on three empirical studies. Concurrent with the third objective, the discussion and Q&A session is expected to initiate substantive interaction and generate interest in an area rich in consumer research potential.

The first talk will be by Carol Dweck (Stanford University), who has researched implicit theories for over thirty years. She has numerous papers on the role of self-theories in journals such as Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Psychological Inquiry, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Review, Developmental Psychology, and Child Development, to name a few, besides several books on the topic. In Dweck’s talk, she will review existing research on implicit theories, present new work (not yet published), and describe the implications of her work for consumer behavior. Dweck will explain how self-theories guide people’s attitude and behavior, both in marketing and non-marketing contexts. Using data from numerous fascinating studies, she will demonstrate that when people believe that an ability is dynamic and can be developed, they are motivated to do so, but when people are led to believe that ability is static and cannot be changed, they adopt a performance orientation trying to prove they already have the ability. In particular, Dweck’s talk will include the role that having an entity or incremental theory plays in consumer behavior, such as how the theory (incremental or entity) that consumers have determines the products and brands they buy, how they react to celebrity endorsements, and how they form impressions of salespeople in retail encounters.

The second presentation by Subramanian Sivaramakrishnan (University of Manitoba), Harish Sujan (Tulane University), and Mita Sujan (Tulane University) will be on the moderating role of implicit theories in cognitively busy consumers’ ability to revise their initial judgments of salespeople. They will present the results of experiments in which they examine the role of self-theories on consumers’ ability to revise their negative initial judgment of a salesperson while interacting with the salesperson. In study 1, they establish that judgment revision is a resource-consuming task that can be impaired by cognitive busyness caused by thinking of questions. In study 2, they show that whether the consumer has an incremental or entity theory of personality moderates the effect of cognitive busyness on judgment revision. In study 3, they show that information signals enable judgment revision even among those cognitively busy consumers whose initial judgments may be relatively rigid. Their research argues that when the initial impression of the salesperson is malleable (incremental theory), overcoming cognitive busyness caused by active listening is possible. Even entity theorists can overcome cognitive busyness and make a judgment revision, provided they are given pointers of the information to follow.

The final presentation by Eric Yorkston (Texas Christian University), Joseph Nunes (University of Southern California), and Shashi Matta (Ohio State University) will demonstrate how the theories people have about their own personality impact their assessment of brands’ personality, particularly in the case of brand extensions. They will present the results of three experiments in which they examine the role that the theory one has about one’s own
personality traits influences their theory on the malleability of product traits. In study 1, they show that incremental theorists are more accepting of brand extensions or repositioning. In study 2, they show that acceptability of a brand extension is based on the implicit theory that the consumer has and not on the number of brand extensions generated. In study 3, they examine boundary conditions for how far incremental theorists are willing to stretch a brand’s traits before they experience a violation of their implicit theory. Their research presents an alternative view to product adoption by suggesting that early versus late product adoption may not be as much a function of risk tolerance as it may be of the implicit theory (incremental or entity) that consumers carry about their personality. Specifically, those with an incremental theory are more willing to adopt new products due to the malleable view they have of product traits.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Implicit Theories: Implications for Consumer Behavior”
Carol S. Dweck, Stanford University

My research on implicit theories has demonstrated the power of simple beliefs to affect people’s judgments, motivation, and behavior. In this talk, I will review past work on implicit theories, I will present new work (not yet published), and I will describe implications for consumer behavior. The implicit theories I have focused on relate to whether individuals believe that human qualities are fixed or malleable. An “entity” theory posits that human traits, such as intelligence or personality, are immutable entities: Each person has a certain amount of intelligence or a certain personality and cannot do much to change it. In contrast, an “incremental” theory rests on the idea that human traits can be developed: Everyone can take measures to increase their intellectual or social abilities.

What is the impact of these implicit theories? The research shows that they affect two broad classes of phenomena. First, implicit theories affect the personal goals people pursue and, second, they affect the judgments and decisions people make about others. I discuss each in turn.

Self-Theories

It has been consistently shown that when people hold an entity theory, their primary goals revolve around proving themselves. In other words, if you only have a fixed amount of competence, then you will be invested in documenting its adequacy. Entity theorists may reject valuable learning opportunities—even at great risk to their future success—if there is a danger of making errors or revealing a deficiency. They may also give up readily in the face of setbacks, worrying that the setback reflects on their ability. In contrast, when people hold an incremental theory, their primary goals revolve around improving themselves. For them it is not about presenting and glorifying, but bettering the self. As a result, they welcome challenges and see errors and setbacks as a natural part of learning.

In several new neurophysiological studies, we monitored people’s brain waves (ERP: event-related potentials) as they worked on a task. We found that entity theorists really harnessed their attention (and showed strong reactions) to information that told them whether their answers had been right or wrong. Once they knew that, they had little interest in further information. In contrast, incremental theorists paid most attention to information that taught them something new.

Perhaps most important, we have shown that implicit theories can be primed or changed—and when they are, motivation and behavior are changed as well. That is, when people are led to believe that an ability can be developed, they become motivated to do so, but when they are led to believe that the ability is carved in stone, they simply want to show they already have it.

Implications of Self-Theories for Consumer Behavior

This work on self-theories has a number of implications for marketing and consumer behavior. First, it suggests that entity theorists are more likely to seek status, popularity, and the appearance of competence through their product purchases—brand names and the status of other product users will matter more to them. In contrast, incremental theorists will seek growth and will favor products that foster self-development. In line with this, the work also suggests that if a product’s appeal will be mostly for entity theorists or for incremental theorists, then messages may be best communicated by inducing an entity or incremental theory mindset at the start of the message. If a product requires a period of learning (as did, for example, the Nordic Track exercise machine), entity theorists may too quickly conclude they are incompetent at it and may reject the product. In short, individuals with different implicit theories are looking for different things, and messages or products that match their mindset will be processed and reacted to preferentially.

Theories About Other People

When people believe that human qualities are fixed, they seek to judge those qualities in others—in other individuals and in other groups. Moreover, they believe that these fixed traits are readily apparent and easy to judge. As a result, entity theorists form rapid judgments—and stereotypes—that are hard to overturn. In contrast, incremental theorists, not believing in fixed traits, form their impressions over time, taking account of the situation and readily updating first impressions in light of new information. Moreover, they are more impressed by people who gain competence over time than those who start off with competence but don’t use it.

New research, for example, shows that entity theorists are far more likely to fall prey to the “fundamental attribution error.” When forming an impression of a new person, they are much less likely to take account of the situation the target person is in and much more likely to think the behavior reflects underlying traits. In contrast, even when under cognitive load, incremental theorists factor the situation into their judgment of the person.

Implications of Theories About Other People for Consumer Behavior

Because entity theorists make rapid and rigid judgments, their first impression of a product or a marketer are paramount. A negative impression will be hard to overcome. However, this also means that once a positive impression has been made, entity theorists may be more loyal to the product and to the marketer. This also suggests that attaching a star, an authority, or a high status individual to a product will affect entity theorists’ judgments more. They will invest these individuals with more credibility than will incremental theorists, and will also desire the products they think these individuals use. More compelling to incremental theorists would be individuals who have stretched, struggled, and overcome obstacles, for it is these people that they hold in higher esteem, and they are likely to attach more credibility to their testimonials.

In summary, implicit theories tell us a great deal about people’s motivation and decision processes, and hold promise of revealing much about consumer behavior.