Effects of Personal Vs. Interpersonal Goal Conflicts on Goal Commitment and Goal-Based Choice

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With limited time and energy, people are often faced with conflicts between important goals. For many people, a primary goal conflict is between personal goals (goals to improve one's health or to advance one's career) and social goals (goals to maintain or improve the quality of relationships.) In a series of experiments, we investigated how people respond to goal conflicts when making choices about their future actions, testing the hypothesis that perceived goal conflict would increase both commitment and ambivalence towards the more chronically important goal.

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SESSION OVERVIEW
The majority of goal research has focused on consumers’ personal goals, such as losing weights or saving money. However, consumers often strive toward group or social goals, defined as goals that are achieved by a group of individuals working together toward a common cause. For example, consumers in a focus group meeting work together to generate opinions on a product, people make pledges to a charity organization to meet the campaign goal, and family members join forces to complete a common task. Classic research finds that whenever a group of individuals work on a collective rather than individual task, they often exhibit less effort, typically labeled social loafing or free riding (Karau and Williams 1993; Kidwell and Bennett 1993; Ringelmann 1913). Accordingly, the focus of this symposium is on understanding the motivation to contribute to a social goal and how to reduce social loafing. Across several lines of research, we further wish to identify how marketers, managers, and other social agents can motivate people to contribute to their social goals.

Three papers explore the motivation to pursue goals shared with others. The first two papers examine what motivates individuals to contribute to a shared social goal. The third paper explores how people respond to goal conflicts between social goals and their own personal goals.

In the first paper, Koo et al. examine what factors best motivate individuals to work toward group goals. These authors find that individuals who are not highly identified with members of a group are most affected by information on other group members’ contributions to date, because this information suggests that a group’s goal is valuable. In contrast, individuals who are already highly identified with members of a group are most affected by information on required contributions to complete the goal, because this information emphasizes the need to progress to complete the goal. For example, the information on accumulated donations to date (vs. remaining donations to go) increased participants’ contributions, when the victims were presented as out-group (“they”; low identification) versus in-group (“we”; high identification).

In a second paper, Ratner et al. investigate how to motivate individuals toward a social goal in the context of charitable giving. They find that advocates for a cause (e.g., individuals making a fundraising request on behalf of an organization such as American Cancer Society) are more effective if they have a personal connection to a victim of that cause (e.g., they lost a family member to cancer) than if they do not have a personal connection. That is, having a relationship with a victim renders one a more effective advocate for the cause thus increases contributions, because such an advocate exerts powerful social influence on potential donors.

The third paper, by Fitzsimons, addresses the problem of goal conflict. With limited time and energy, people are often faced with a conflict between personal goals (e.g., career pursuit, academics) and social goals (e.g., relationship with family members). This paper investigates how people respond to conflicts between social and personal goals when making choices about their future actions. It finds that perceived goal conflict increases both commitment and ambivalence towards the more chronically important goal. For example, participants who chronically valued relationships more than academics reinforced their commitment to relationship goals in the face of conflict; however, they also showed increased negative affect and frustration about their relationship goals. The pattern was mirrored for participants who chronically valued academics more than relationships.

Taken together, the three papers provide an overview of how people pursue goals shared with others, which have important theoretical as well as practical implications for goal research. Data collection in all papers is complete and the session includes a total of 9 studies. All participants have agreed to present should the session be accepted. Each presentation will be for 20 minutes, which will allow 15 minutes for discussion by Dilip Soman (the discussion leader) and Q&A at the end of the session.

We expect that this session will be of interest to a broad audience of consumer researchers but of special interest to those researchers interested in issues regarding goals, motivation and social influences. The area of goals is one that has generated considerable interest over the past several years, and we hope that our presentation of recent findings on how people pursue group goals will result in active debate and generate ideas for future research.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Group Goals and Sources of Motivation: When Others Don’t Get the Job Done, I (Might) Pick Up the Slack”

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Many goals that people strive to attain qualify as group goals, which are defined as goals that a collection of individuals work together to achieve (Zander 1980). Examples include goals such as engaging in social movements, pledging to charity, volunteering for community outreach programs, generating ideas in team meetings, and accomplishing chores with housemates. Interestingly, despite the benefits group goals produce, individuals do not always work efficiently or effectively in collective settings. While much inefficiency of groups can be explained by incongruence in values and demographic differences amongst members (John, Chadwick and Thatcher 1997), group productivity or performance also tends to suffer because of motivational deficits that occur when a goal is shared with others (e.g., social loafing, Ringelmann 1913, and free riding, Kerr and Bruun 1983). Acknowledging this general tendency to underperform, the present work addresses the different sources of motivation to contribute to group goal striving.

The theory and research on the dynamics of self-regulation (Fishbach and Dhar 2005; Koo and Fishbach 2008) attest that people ask themselves one out of two questions when deciding to invest in a personal goal: is the goal valuable? Or, is the pace of pursuing the (already valuable) goal adequate? For example, students can decide to study for an exam because they believe it is important to master that topic of knowledge or, alternatively, because they think they have not made enough progress. We propose that the sources of motivation described above not only apply to personal goals but to group goals as well. Group members may wish to assess whether a group goal is valuable, in which case they seek social proof for goal value in others’ contributions (Cialdini 1993). Under such circumstances, prior contributions by others would increase one’s own contribution through a dynamic of
highlighting other group members’ actions. Group members may also wish to assess whether a goal has progressed to a sufficient level, in which case they infer need for progress on the basis of others’ inadequate efforts. In such situations, people would compensate for or balance out the actions of others with their own contributions.

What, then, determines people’s concern with whether others are pursuing a valuable goal versus pursuing a goal sufficiently? We propose that the level of identification with other group members determines whether one’s source of motivation is the perceived value of the goal versus need for progress by group members. Individuals identify highly with others that they categorize as part of themselves, but identify less so with others that they deem as separate from themselves (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner 1987). In turn, high group identifiers feel more committed to their group and experience the positive and negative outcomes of their group as their own, whereas low group identifiers wish to evaluate the importance of the group to their identity (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 1997; McCauley 2001).

We predict low group identifiers are posited to ask whether a group’s goal is valuable. Therefore, an emphasis on prior effort expenditures by other group members that signal high goal value should increase their own efforts. High group identifiers, on the other hand, are already committed to their group’s goal, and, consequently, are posited to focus on need for progress. Therefore, emphasizing lack of effort by others rather than prior effort expenditures should increase their own efforts more.

Three studies tested these predictions. Study 1 examined the contribution of ideas to a focus group. To assess each individual’s contribution, participants work individually but assume their input will be collapsed with other group members (Jackson and Williams 1985). The group goal was to generate ten promotion ideas for a new cellular phone (iPhone). We manipulated identification by describing other team members as affiliated with an out-group (rival universities; low identification) or salient in-group (same university; high identification). We manipulated the framing of progress information (presumably, 50%) by informing participants that other group members had contributed about half of the ideas to date, or that half the ideas were missing to meet the goal. As expected, we found that the focus on to-date (vs. to-go) contributions increased idea generation for low identifiers but decreased idea generation for high identifiers.

Study 2 and 3 extended these findings in the context of a charitable fundraising. We predict that the level of identification with a victimized group influences the source of motivation for people’s actions toward the group, particularly their responses to solicitations when information about to-date versus to-go contributions is made salient. Specifically, Study 2 assessed Americans’ willingness to help the victims of Southern California wildfires after fall 2007. We manipulated identification with the victimized group by describing them as members of an out-group (“they, the residents of Southern California”) or in-group (“we, Americans”). We further provided information on money raised to date or money still required to achieve the campaign goal. As predicted, we found that emphasizing donations to date (vs. to go) increased willingness to donate for out-group members, but decreased willingness to donate for in-group members. Study 3 was a large-scale field experiment (with Compassion International), which assessed actual contributions. Following Kenya riots in December 2007, we created a campaign that established a special crisis fund to support affected children. In the solicitation letter, we manipulated identification with the victims (they vs. we) and the focus on accumulated versus remaining donations. Consistent with Study 2, we found that group identification determined the relative impact of focus on accumulated versus remaining contributions.

Taken together, the current article provides important lessons with respect to how to increase contributions to a group goal. First, it suggests that situational factors such as background of group members or semantic framing (they vs. we) can push people to increase or decrease their group identification. Second, it suggests that boosting group identification does not necessarily guarantee greater contribution to a group goal but one should employ appropriate strategies that correspond to the sources of motivation (value vs. need for progress) as determined by the group identification. Such strategies will be successful at increasing contributions and can reduce the robust social loafing and free riding.

“How Can You Say ‘No’? Deference Granted to Advocates Who Are Victims”

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What factors impact whether consumers will donate their money and time to others? Organizations like the American Cancer Society rely on individual donations, and understanding the factors that impact individual donation behavior is of interest to a growing number of consumer researchers. Recent findings suggest several factors that impact the degree to which individuals feel sympathetic toward victims of causes and their likelihood to engage in actions to support the cause. For example, an identifiable victim produces greater sympathy and donation compared with an unidentifiable victim (Small and Loewenstein 2003), and friendship with a victim leads to greater sympathy towards other victims of the same misfortune (Small and Simonsohn 2008). Related work indicates that people feel more sympathy toward a single victim than toward many victims who suffer the same fate (Slovic 2007).

In the present research, we explore the role that social influence can play in impacting people’s willingness to engage in donation behaviors. Specifically, we test the hypothesis that being a victim gives one psychological standing to have one’s requests honored, even when a victim is not more effective at changing people’s attitudes toward the cause for which they are advocating. In these studies, we look both at those who were directly impacted by a cause (e.g., the person suffered physical harm) or indirectly via a close relationship to the immediate victim (e.g., the parent of a child who died due to an unsafe product).

Our first study tests people’s lay theory and demonstrates that people expect an advocate who is a victim to be more knowledgeable, persuasive and sympathetic than a non-victim. Further, we find that people have a lay belief that victims are more effective spokespeople than non-victims because of the greater persuasion that the former engender about the importance of the cause.

Our subsequent studies investigate whether the social influence produced by the victims comes about because they are more persuasive, or whether they simply elicit more compliance. One study employed a 2 (illness that caused suffering for the advocate: heart attack vs. cancer) X 2 (organization: American Heart Association vs. American Cancer Society) between-subjects design. Results indicated that people find it harder to say no to another person who asks them to attend a meeting when the cause of the meeting is the same as the cause of the advocate’s suffering. Respondents felt significantly more disrespectful saying no when the advocate’s parent had cancer and the organization was the American Cancer Society than the American Heart Association and significantly more disrespectful saying no when the parent had a heart attack and
the organization was the American Heart Association than the American Cancer Society. Information about the advocate did not change people’s perception of the importance of the cause.

Another study provides further evidence that people find it hard to say no to a victim because of perceived standing, rather than because of attitude change. In this study, people find it harder to say “no” to help a victim who provides weak arguments in support of the cause than a non-victim who provides strong arguments in support of the cause.

A final study provides additional evidence that the greater deference provided to appeals made by those who have suffered personally is due to compliance rather than persuasion. This study presented the respondents with a question of how much they would donate (i.e., WTP) to a Cancer Society after learning of a charitable appeal by someone who identified their status as a victim (i.e., that their parent had cancer) versus non-victim of the target disease (i.e., the had a heart attack). Half of the respondents were asked to indicate an amount between $0 and $10 whereas the other half of the respondents were asked to indicate a donation amount that is either $0 or $10 to the Cancer Society. We found that when respondents could choose any amount between $0 and $10, the number of people donating $10 did not differ significantly as a function of whether the advocate had suffered because of cancer. However, when asked whether they would donate $0 vs. $10 to the cause, significantly more participants who read about the appeal from the individual whose parent died of cancer (rather than heart disease) opted to make the $10 donation. Therefore, when the advocate indicated a connection to the cause as a victim, it increased donors’ willingness to give something rather than nothing. People did not want to refuse to help the person who identified their victimhood because they otherwise felt guilty.

Together, these results suggest that being a direct or an indirect victim not only makes a person more sympathetic to a cause (Small & Simonsohn in press) but also makes the person him or herself a more effective advocate for the cause because others find it hard to reject their requests. Although we find that people endorse a lay belief that the effectiveness of a victim is driven by attitude change, our results suggest that the effectiveness is driven by their psychological standing to make requests. An advocate’s status as a victim makes it hard to say no them, as long as the request relates to the issue about which the victim suffered. As a result, a consumer’s own willingness and motivation to engage in donation behavior can be strongly influenced by the social context in which the donation request unfolds.

References

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With limited time and energy, people are often faced with conflicts between important goals. For many people, a primary goal conflict is between personal goals (goals to improve one’s health or to advance one’s career) and interpersonal goals (goals to maintain or improve the quality of relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners.) For example, an individual may feel torn about whether to work late (advancing career goals) or return home early to spend time with her family (advancing social goals.) In a series of experiments, we investigated how people respond to goal conflicts when making choices about their future actions and preferences, testing the hypothesis that perceived goal conflict would increase commitment to the more chronically important goal, but would also cause increased ambivalence and negativity about the chosen goal.

In the first study, we set out to test the basic hypothesis. Participants completed pre-measures of the importance of their academic achievement and romantic relationship goals. In the experimental session, participants read an article apparently from a popular magazine reviewing research that either (a) showed that relationships and academics were a zero-sum game in that most people struggled to successfully pursue goals in both domains, or (b) showed that relationships and academics were not a zero-sum game in that most people could easily successfully pursue goals in both domains. Participants then evaluated their commitment and affect towards their relationship and academic goals. As predicted, participants who chronically valued relationships more than academics reinforced their commitment to relationship goals in the face of conflict; however, as predicted, they also showed increased negative affect and frustration about their relationship goals. The pattern was mirrored for participants who chronically valued academics more than relationships.

In the second study, we set out to manipulate the importance of the goal, and to examine the consequences of personal-interpersonal goal conflicts for choice. Participants (all undergraduate females) completed pre-measures of the importance of their dieting/fitness goals and their friendship/social life goals. In the experimental session, the importance of the fitness goal was temporarily manipulated via a goal salience manipulation, in which participants were led to feel they were doing well or poorly on this goal. The manipulation was taken from Fishbach & Dhar (2005): Participants are asked to mark the divergence of their ideal from current weight on a scale. In the low goal salience condition, the scale ranged only a small amount, leading participants to perceive a large discrepancy between their current and ideal weights. In the high goal salience condition, the scale ranged a large amount, leading participants to perceive a smaller discrepancy between their current and ideal weights. Participants then read an article modified from a recent popular fitness magazine reviewing research that either (a) suggested that friendships often interfere with achieving dieting goals, or that (b) friendships do not interfere with dieting goals. Participants evaluated their commitment and affect towards their social and dieting goals, evaluated dieting-consistent (e.g., organic energy bars and fruit) and inconsistent products (e.g., candy and chocolate bars) that served as rewards for experimental participation, filled out ballots to enter in a draw for dieting-consistent gift baskets (i.e., filled with healthy foods, gift certificates for local gyms and fitness clothing stores, and subscriptions for fitness magazines) and neutral gift baskets (i.e., filled with gift certificates for local clothing stores and movie theaters, and subscriptions for entertainment magazines), and chose a reward (fruit or candy). As predicted, participants in the high dieting goal salience condition, for whom the dieting goal was temporarily of increased importance, responded to perceived goal conflict by enhancing their commitment to the dieting goal as shown in their self-reported ratings and their choices. They were likelier to fill out ballots to win dieting-consistent gift baskets and to choose a dieting-consistent reward. However, as predicted, the increase in
commitment was again accompanied by an increase in negative affect towards the dieting goal in self-report ratings of the goal and goal-consistent products. Participants in the high dieting goal salience condition responded to perceptions of conflict by choosing goal-consistent products, but by providing more ambivalent ratings of the goal-consistent products.

In these two studies, participants responded to perceptions of goal conflict by increasing commitment to the focal or chronically important goal, as evidenced in their self-reports and their goal-consistent product choices. However, the perceived goal conflict produced an additional cost: Participants also felt more negatively and ambivalently towards the goals and the goal-consistent products. Thus, in everyday life, when people face these common personal vs. interpersonal goal conflicts, there are important consequences for goal commitment and goal-based choice.