Sequential Influences on Dishonest Behavior

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People’s escalation of behavior has been studied in several domains, particularly in addiction. We extend that research to the domain of ethical decision making. In three studies we find that sequential temptations to be dishonest increase such behaviors to a point where they cross a threshold, tip, and result in continuous dishonesty. If given a choice, however, people strategically avoid future temptations, even if costly. In addition, positive reinforcers proved effective in helping people to reduce dishonesty, while confessions made matters worse.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In the recent decade consumer research has seen a burgeoning interest in self-regulation. A host of situational antecedents to self-regulation failures have been identified, including resource availability, emotion, regulatory focus, and justification to name just a few. Several individual difference measures have also been developed including the self-control scale, impulsivity scale, hyperopia scale, frugality scale and others. These research streams identify a wide range of individual/situational antecedents to self-regulation failure and if they teach us one thing—they teach us that such failure is bound to happen.

However, a singular self-regulation failure does not lead to the problems often cited in this research stream; having the occasional slice of cake does not an obese person make. Instead, one needs to make sequential self-regulation failures to encounter undesirable end states such as obesity and debt. This session examines sequential self control choices. We accept the widely held notion that self-regulation is no easy feat; some of us can succeed at it some of the time, but all of us cannot succeed at it all of the time. As a result, initial failures of self-regulation are bound to happen, and what determines their long-term effects is how we respond to them.

This session investigates these responses. We propose that there are essentially two response options: recommit to the goal and become a “reformed sinner”, or abandon the goal and “continue to sin”. In three papers we examine what might lead people to do one or the other, what actions are effective in “reforming”, what actions consumers themselves might take to protect themselves against “continued sinning”, and whether these responses can be related to an underlying individual difference.

In the first paper, Finkelstein and Fishbach examine the effects of feedback regarding initial failure on subsequent self-regulation. In five studies they find that experienced consumers are more sensitive to negative feedback about their lack of accomplishments. This feedback allows them to monitor their progress towards a goal and therefore supports “reform”, that is, subsequent goal-congruent behavior. Experienced consumers therefore seek negative feedback as well as provide negative feedback to experienced others. These findings suggest that communication with experienced consumers should focus on past failures and “misses” to encourage future goal-congruent actions, whereas communication with inexperienced consumers should focus on prior success.

In the second paper, Mazar and Ariely examine ethical decision making and the “What-The-Hell Effect” (WTHE henceforth). The WTHE is directly related to sequential self-regulation. This effect occurs when an individuals who has failed at an initial self-regulation goal (e.g., a dieter having one cookie from the jar), then completely foregoes the goal and subsequently engages in goal-incongruent behavior (e.g., eating the contents of the entire cookie jar). Mazar and Ariely show that there is a WTHE in ethical decision making, such that people who have cheated on previous tasks and pass a certain threshold, appear to forgo their moral self-regulation, and keep on cheating. The authors identify conditions that moderate these effects such as positive reinforcers (against subsequent “sining”) and environmental control. However, this paper shows that other methods, such as confessing, do not help sinners reform.

In the third paper, Zemack-Rugar, Corus, and Brinberg develop a scale that measures individuals’ propensity to enact “WTHE”. The authors argue that like many other self-regulation behaviors, the tendency to respond to initial failure with reform vs. continued sinning is an individual difference factor. Moreover, this construct is distinct from the tendency to enact initial failures. The authors discuss the scale development process, identifying two cognitive/emotional factors (“sin as motivation” and “sin as permission”) that differentiate between those who tend to enact WTHE and those who do not. The authors also provide three studies in which the WTHE predicts post-failure self-regulation behavior above and beyond existing measures.

We believe this session will appeal to a wide audience at ACR. The session focuses on a topic of great interest, self-regulation, but with a much needed twist—sequential choice. There is relatively little research on sequential choice, and in particular—sequential self-regulation. In three papers we offer several different points of view on this issue, examining a variety of consumer domains (from friendship to cheating to eating) across 14 studies. We also have a discussant, Jonathan Levav, with great experience and knowledge in the domain of sequential choice. His comments are sure to add insight to the discussion during this session.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Seeking, Giving, and Responding to Negative Feedback in Self-Regulation”
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Research on the Dynamics of Self-Regulation attests that in the course of pursuing multiple goals (e.g., the desire to enjoy one’s food and be a healthy person), whether a consumer experiences commitment to or progress towards a goal influences the consumer’s course of self-regulation over time. While an experience of commitment encourages goal-congruent actions due to an increased sense that one can perform the goal, the experience of not making progress towards the goal encourages goal-congruent actions when it signals that one is not doing as much as one should.

The present research applies this framework to understanding feedback seeking, feedback giving, and response to feedback with respect to goals that involve a sequence of choices that unfold over time. We propose that the emphasis on assessing commitment or monitoring progress changes as consumers become more experienced with a task. Specifically, as consumers become more experienced at pursuing a goal, they are more sensitive to negative feedback about their lack of accomplishments as this feedback allows them to monitor their progress towards a goal. Thus, experienced consumers are more likely to seek negative feedback about their lack of accomplishments, give negative feedback to experienced others, and will be more likely to subsequently perform goal-congruent actions when they consider negative feedback about their “misses.”

We report five studies that tested these hypotheses. In study 1, students in a dancing class were made to feel that they are either novices or experienced, before they sought feedback about their mistakes and how they can improve. We found that compared with students who felt they have been dancing a short while (“inexperienced”), students who felt that they have been dancing a long time, sought more negative feedback about their dancing.

Study 2 extends these results to a foreign language class, where we measured how the level of experience influences stu-
Continuing to Sin or a Reformed Sinner: Examining Sequential Self-Regulation Choices

In our daily lives we find ourselves continuously tempted to behave dishonestly: overstating expense reports or tax exemptions, taking credit for other people’s work, picking up a zip car earlier than what we have booked it for, or copying a song. It’s easy to deviate from the path of honesty from time to time, even if most of us value honesty and have very high beliefs in our own morality. But is there a tipping point? An unwelcome moment when our dishonest behavior “crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire” (Gladwell 2002)? This paper investigates dishonesty in an episodic rather than singular context and explores mechanisms to return to the path of honesty.

People’s escalation of behavior has been studied among others in the context of addiction. For example, a dieter, who, in a moment of weakness, succumbs to the temptation and has a bite of chocolate, is more likely to give up any self-control induced restriction and eat the entire bar—after all, if one’s daily dieting goal has been already violated, the day is lost. This type of behavior typical for dieters has been coined the “What-the-hell” effect (Polivy and Herman 1985). One popular strategy to prevent oneself from falling into such a trap is to eliminate tempting foods from the immediate environment altogether, which requires not only to admit that indulging is unwanted, but also to foresee future self-control problems (Fishbach and Trope 2007).

When it comes, however, to ethical decision making it has been criticized that most theories and empirical evidences focus on singular events, neglecting the influence of recent behavioral histories (Zhong, Liljenquist, and Cain 2009). For example, it has been shown that when tempted to benefit financially from cheating on a test, a vast amount of people will cheat, but only by a small amount, in order to maintain their moral self-worth (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008). Such research is important to understand the basic mechanism underlying the decision to be dishonest, but falls short off considering that not only current situational factors and individual traits can influence subsequent behaviors but also past situational factors and behaviors.

Given that continuous temptations play an important role in the context of unwanted behaviors such as binge eating, we set out to explore (1) whether there exists something like the “what-the-hell” effect in the domain of dishonesty and (2) what are the measures to break a vicious cycle of dishonesty. We report three studies that document people’s vulnerability to continuous temptations, which can result in unwanted escalations of dishonesty, and ways to get out of them. Study 1 shows that over 100 trials of a task, in which each trial offers a choice between being honest and dishonest, at some point 67% of participants show behavior in line with “what the hell” effect: they reach a point at which they cheat all the time. Mark Twain contemplated “there are several good protections against temptations but the surest is cowardice.” In line with this notion, we find in study 2 that if given an explicit choice about the environment to which people want to be exposed to (continuing with the same tempting task as before or moving to a less tempting task), a considerable amount is willing and able to avoid subsequent temptations—even if costly. Finally, study 3 investigates the effectiveness of various measures to reform a “sinner”. For this purpose we introduced a break in the middle of a tempting task and either gave no instructions, asked participants to think about their past good deeds, or to confess their regrettable actions. The good news is that we find that positive reinforcers can be effective. However, confessing one’s sins to strengthen one’s resolutions, and regain a pure soul appears rather harmful.

The implications of this research may be substantial for policy and education. Future studies that investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying positive reinforcers and confessions, their potential connection to moral self-regulation, and the long-term effectiveness of these approaches particularly in light of adaptation can provide valuable insights needed to design better measures to curb dishonesty.

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“The ‘What The Hell Effect’ Scale: Measuring Post-Failure Sequential Self-Control Choice Tendencies”
Yael Zemack-Rugar, Virginia Tech, USA
Canan Corus, St. John’s University, USA
David Brinberg, Virginia Tech, USA

Self-control failures lead to a variety of individual and social malaise including obesity and debt. However, one could argue that such long term outcomes require repeated consumption episodes, and repeated self-control failures. The present research examines one aspect of such sequential self-control choices.

In particular, we examine how individuals respond to initial self-control failure in subsequent choices. This question is interesting because occasional self-control failures are bound to happen; it is how we respond to these failures that determines long term implications.

Literature suggests individuals can respond in one of two ways: self correct by increasing self control or continue to indulge. The latter behavior, continued indulgence, has been dubbed the “What The Hell Effect” (WTHE henceforth). We argue that much like other self-control characteristics, the tendency to enact the WTHE is based on an individual difference; we develop a measure capturing this difference.

What limited research exists about WTHE focuses on situational antecedents such as goal framing, including short/long and gain/loss frames. However, limited attention is paid to cognitions/emotions experienced in response to goal-failure, individual differences on these factors, and their effects on subsequent behavior.

We address this gap by focusing on the thoughts/feelings that consumers have in response to initial failure, and how these help predict their responses. To this end, we developed the WTHE scale, focusing on two central consumer self-control domains, eating and spending. We briefly describe below the scale development process and 3 predictive validity studies.

Given the limited literature to support item generation, we allowed for an organic development of WTHE questionnaire through consumer experiences. In study 1, 11 scenarios describing WTHE situations were created and presented to 73 participants. Each participant saw 3 random scenarios, and was asked what they would feel/think/do in response (each separately). Participants were then asked to make a choice related to the scenario and were finally asked to evaluate how realistic each scenario was.

We created a 25-item coding scheme designed to capture the different thoughts, feelings, and actions. The diaries were then coded by two independent coders (agreement: 95%). A high correlation of responses to each item was observed across all scenarios (Cronbach’s alpha>.7 for all), lending credibility to the selected thought/feeling themes.

The 7 (3 budget, 4 food) most realistic scenarios were selected, and 25 items (corresponding to the themes) were created for each. In study 2, 163 undergraduate students completed this 175-item questionnaire. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted leading to the identification of two factors. Factor one had six items and was consistent with an adaptive, corrective, response to goal-failure (failure as motivation). Factor 2 had three items and was consistent with a WTHE type response (failure as permission). The WTHE score was designed to be the difference between the first factor and second factor average, with lower scores indicating a higher tendency to enact the WTHE.

In study 3, this 63-item questionnaire was administered to 124 participants along with twelve other scales (e.g., self control, impulsivity, causality, perfectionism, locus of control, dieting). The scale was significantly correlated with five scales (TOSCA, dieting, two causality subscales, and impulsivity) in the expected direction, but only to a moderate degree (highest correlation 0.35), suggesting the scale was unique.

Having developed the questionnaire, we turned to examine its predictive validity. In studies 4 and 5 we provided participants with an eating/spending scenario similar to that provided in Soman and Cheema (2004), where participants had the opportunity to buy a ticket to a concert (have dessert) after either having already exceeding their budget (calorie) goal/having enough money (calories) to afford the ticket (cake).

In a separate session participants completed the WTHE scale, the four scales previously found to correlate with our scale, and several other new scales (e.g., Elaboration on Potential Outcomes, Frugality). Analysis revealed that our scale uniquely predicted whether participants indulged/not when they had already exceeded their budget (calorie) goal. The only other significant measure was the self-control scale, which predicted behavior only for those participants who had not exceeded their budget (calorie) goal. Thus, whereas the self-control scale predicts the likelihood of initial goal-failure, the WTHE scale uniquely predicts post-failure behavior, a separate construct.

Study 6 is ongoing and is a longitudinal study involving diary recording. We seek to examine in this study whether the real-life behavior of consumers following goal failure (recorded in diaries) is uniquely predicted by the WTHE scale.

In sum, the WTHE scale is extremely important and should be of interest to researchers examining self control. It not only identifies an individual difference in responding to failure, it provides insight as to the underlying cognitions/feelings (failure as permission/failure as motivation) that may underlie this difference. As sequential self-control failures are what truly underlie the long-term negative effects on consumers, it is important to identify those consumers most vulnerable to those effects as well as the reasons for this vulnerability.

REFERENCES
Zhong, Chen-Bo, Katie Liljenquist, and Daylian M. Cain (2009), Moral Self-Regulation: Licensing & Compensation, University of Toronto.