An Obligation to Work Or an Opportunity to Play? the Influence of Task Construal and Task Completion on Regulatory Behavior

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Identical behaviors can be perceived in different ways by different people. For example, trying a piece of candy can be construed as an act of regulation (i.e., the trial is limited to one piece of candy) or an opportunity for a rewarding experience (i.e., eat something tasty). We posit that individual differences (e.g., a person’s level of self-control) and contextual factors combine to influence the construal of a behavior as regulatory or rewarding. In turn, the construal of the behavior, and the degree to which the behavior is interrupted or completed, influence a person’s self-control in subsequent behaviors.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Self-control has been proposed to be one of the most important and beneficial processes in the human personality structure. Successful self-control has been linked to a broad range of desirable outcomes (e.g., healthier interpersonal relationships, greater popularity, and better mental health; see Gailliot et al. 2007). Although a large amount of research has been done on this topic, many important questions remain to be answered. For example, what is the role of self in self-control? Does resource depletion necessarily lead to more impulsivity? How do different definitions of self affect impulsive behavior? How does affect impact the self-control process? This session brings together four papers that intend to address these important questions and thus advance our knowledge of the mechanisms and boundary conditions under which consumers engage in self-control.

The first paper (Mehta et al.) aims to reconcile an existing discrepancy in the self-control literature. While traditional research on myopic behavior suggests that a high versus low construal level leads to less indulgence, more recent work on hyperopia implies the opposite. This paper demonstrates that construal level interacts with self-focus, which jointly determines an individual’s indulgence level. Specifically, when self is not made salient, findings in the myopia literature are replicated, whereas when self is the central focus, effect reversal as predicted by the hyperopia literature is observed. The second paper (Ein-Gar and Johnson) further explores the role of self in self-control dilemmas. It suggests that construing the self differently influences preferences and choices such that under a “becoming” mindset consumers are more prudent whereas under a “being” mindset they are more prone to indulge. The third paper (Laran and Janiszewski) suggests that consumers’ chronic self-control level affects their task perception (whether perceive as work or play) and consequently affects their self-control in subsequent tasks. Finally, the last paper (Komarova et al.) investigates the role of affect in self-regulation tasks. It demonstrates that under positive mood consumers are less likely to engage in mental accounting to justify impulsive spending.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Exploring Role of Self in Self-Control”

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The classic literature on self-control focuses on myopic behavior, suggesting that individuals demonstrate self-control failure i.e., yield to immediate hedonic temptations when they focus on short-term benefits versus long-term goals (Trope and Fishbach 2000; Fujita et al. 2006). One way to reduce myopia is to induce a higher construal level, so that individuals focus on long-term benefits (Fujita et al. 2006; Liberman et al. 2007). However, recent research on hyperopia suggests an opposite form of self-control failure, namely many individuals have excessive farsightedness, thus they over-control themselves and constantly choose virtue over vice (e.g., Kivetz and Keinan 2006). Such a tendency is likely to evoke feelings of missing out in life and regret over time. One way to overcome hyperopia is to introduce a higher construal level (e.g., introducing greater temporal perspective; Keinan and Kivetz 2008), so that individuals will foresee their regret and consequently engage in indulgence to correct their hyperopic tendency.

The above two lines of research reveal an inconsistency. While the classic literature on myopia suggests that a higher construal level should lead to less indulgence (Fujita et al. 2006), recent work on hyperopia implies just the opposite. This research aims to offer reconciliation to the above described inconsistency.

We propose that construal level interacts with self-focus, which jointly determines an individual’s present indulgence level. Specifically, when self is being explicitly primed, individuals will become aware of their chronic tendencies. Because a wide range of consumers experience some degree of tightwaddness and perceive themselves as having insufficient indulgence (Kivetz and Simonson 2002), self prime is likely to make people realize their hyperopic tendency. Further, because a high construal level prompts people to think about their lives in the grand scheme of things, it may cause people to experience or foresee regret as they believe they have overly deprived themselves of pleasures in life. Thus, these individuals will try to correct their hyperopic tendency by engaging in more indulgence, such as spending more on hedonic products at the present moment. In contrast, when self-focused individuals are primed with a low construal level, they should behave according to their immediately accessible chronic disposition. Thus, they would follow their hyperopic tendency, shying away from indulgence. In other words, when self is made salient, we expect to replicate findings from the hyperopia literature, i.e., a high versus low construal level should lead to more indulgence.

On the other hand, when self is not made salient, we expect that people may not become consciously aware of their chronic behavioral tendency. Consequently, the more salient manipulation of construal level will override any people’s chronic tendency and determine indulgence level. Here, we expect to replicate the findings observed in the traditional research on myopia, namely a high versus low construal level should lead to less indulgence (e.g., Fujita et al. 2006; Trope et al. 2007).

A set of five experiments were conducted which offer support to our theory. Study 1 tests our above predictions directly by manipulating construal level (high vs. low) and self focus (self vs. control). The focal task involved presenting participants with a list of the hedonic and utilitarian products and asking them to indicate their highest willingness-to-pay (WTP) for each item. Higher WTP indicates greater indulgence. As expected, when self was not made salient, we replicated findings in the myopia literature, such that participants indicated higher WTP for both types of products (utilitarian and hedonic) when they were in low versus high construal level. However, when self was made salient, we observed the anticipated reversal as predicted in the hyperopia literature, but only for hedonic products (i.e., a high versus low construal level led to greater WTP). For utilitarian products, however, construal level did not affect these self-focused individuals’ WTP, presumably because utilitarian products may not provide the kind of indulgence that hyperopic individuals are looking for at the high construal level. Thus, in the subsequent studies, only hedonic products were included.

While study 1 offer reconciliation to the inconsistency in the self-control literature, it does not shed light on the well-established inconsistency in the self-control literature. It does not shed light on the well-established inconsistency in the self-control literature.
resource-depletion model of self-control. This model posits that individuals have limited resources, and depletion in resources leads to myopia (Vohs and Schemsielich 2003). Although a large number of studies have established the resource-depletion effect, it is not entirely clear why resource depletion leads to myopia. Building on our theorizing and findings from study 1, we propose that resource availability can affect individuals’ construal level, which consequently affects indulgence. Limited (ample) resources are likely to cause individuals to construe things at a lower (higher) level, thus leading to greater (less) indulgence. If the above hypothesis is true, we should also observe the moderating effect of self focus on the relationship between resource availability and indulgence level. We test these theorizing in the next two studies.

Study 2 tests the hypothesis that resource level affects construal level which subsequently influences indulgence. Resource level was manipulated via having participants remember either a two-digit (high resource level) or an eight-digit (low level) number, and participants’ current construal level was measured via the 25-item BIF scale (Vallacher and Wegner 1989). The focal task involved having participants indicate their WTP for the five hedonic products as used in study 1. Replicating prior research, we found that resource depletion (vs. ample resources) led to higher indulgence (i.e., WTP). More importantly this relationship was mediated by construal level.

Building on study 2, study 3 aims to replicate study 1 results by replacing construal level with resource level. Thus, this study employed a 2 (self focus: self vs. control) X 2 (resource level: high vs. low) between subjects design. Results from this study provided theoretical replication of study 1. Specifically, when self was made salient, participants revealed greater indulgence when they had high versus low resources. However, when self was not primed, we replicated the resource depletion model prediction, i.e. greater indulgence when people had low versus high resources.

Study 4 extends on our basic theorizing by identifying an important moderator, namely individuals’ chronic hyperopia tendency. We propose and find that the two-way interaction between resource level and self focus as shown above is only salient among high hyperopia individuals. Finally, study 5 demonstrates that our effects are specific to hyperopia individuals, who experience regret about their self-control behavior. For certain individuals, they do not experience regret about their self-control tendency, like those who are high on the self-control scale, the above interaction was not expected, nor observed.

In sum, this research reconciles an apparent discrepancy in the self-control literature, thus bridging two separate lines of research (i.e., myopia and hyperopia). In addition, we add to the construal level literature by demonstrating that resource availability affects construal level, which subsequently determines individuals’ current indulgence.

“Being Indulgent and Becoming Prudent”
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It is proposed that momentary self definitions may be associated with specific mindsets and that these mindsets can impact how consumers behave in self-control dilemmas. Specifically, we suggest that defining oneself in the future leads to prudent preferences and choices while defining oneself in the present leads to more hedonic preferences and choices. The underlying process concerns the association of the momentary self definitions with different levels of construal.

A momentary self definition may be characterized as defining oneself in terms of the present state and condition; the becoming mindset, or in terms of whom one is becoming; the becoming mindset, (Blanton, 2001; Johnson & Stapel, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986). We argue that the being mindset is characterized by low levels of construal in which objects are processed in terms of their abstract characteristics. In contrast, we argue that the becoming mindset is characterized by high levels of construal in which objects are processed in terms of their concrete characteristics.

Shifts in self definition should be accompanied by shifts in construal level for a variety of reasons. First, being and becoming mindsets differ temporally and temporal factors influence construal level. That is, defining oneself in the moment may feel temporally closer than when defining oneself in the future. Hence, the being mindset should be associated with lower level construals than the becoming mindset. Second, these self definitions are related to factors that increase psychological distance, and therefore influence construal levels (Kim, Zhang, & Li, 2008; Liberman, Trope & Waslak, 2007). Given that descriptions of the self in the present may be higher in their probability of being correct or accurate; these self definitions should psychologically be closer than self definitions based on future change. Thus, the being self should be accompanied by lower levels of construal and the becoming self should be accompanied by higher levels of construal, (Todorov et al., 2007).

In addition to altering levels of construal, changes in self definitions are expected to influence behavior in self control dilemmas, with becoming selves associated with greater self control than being selves. These predictions are based, in part, on previous research demonstrating that shifts in temporal focus and orientation influence behavior in self control dilemmas because they alter levels of construal (Fujita, Trope, Liberman & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Malkoc, Zauberman, & Ul, 2005). Similarly, because the becoming self leads to higher levels of construal and these levels of construal carry over to subsequent situations (Malkoc, Zauberman, & Bettman, 2008), people who are defining themselves in terms of the future should be better able to engage in acts of self control than people who are defining themselves in terms of the present.

Apart from influencing preferences for products, being and becoming mindsets should be associated with differential sensitivity to product information. In general, product information that matches consumer’s motivational state is valued whereas product information that mismatches consumer’s goal states is devalued (Fishbach & Zhang, 2008; Hong & Lee, 2008). Accordingly, in a becoming mindset, individuals should find information regarding the practicality of a product to be more persuasive, while in a being mindset, information regarding the indulgent qualities of a product should be more persuasive.

Study 1 (n=67, age mean=36.85) examined the relation between construal levels and self definitions. To activate becoming or being selves, participants wrote a brief self description about “who you may become, focusing on the person you may develop into” (becoming) or about “who you are right now, focusing on the stable things that define your personality” (being). Participants in the becoming condition described themselves more abstractly (i.e. higher level construal) whereas participants in the being condition used more concrete nouns (i.e. lower level construal) (F(1.65)=9.93, p=.002).

Study 2 (n=64, age mean=19.5) examined how eliciting a being or becoming self affects spending preferences in an open-ended context. Participants wrote a brief self description (same as in Study 1) and then imagined that they had just won $1000 in a raffle. In the becoming mindset participants listed more prudent spending choices while in a being mindset they listed more indulgent choices (x2(4, N=64)=3.83, p=.05).

In Study 3 (n=72, age mean=36.92) participants were asked to imagine they were having a housewarming party. They assembled a gift registry from a selection of 20 gift items. Activation of
mindsets was the same as in Study 1. Participants in a becoming mindset preferred practical to indulgent options more than participants in the being mindset (X²(2, N=72) = 6.39, p = .04).

Study 4 (n=89, age_mean=21.6) activated becoming or being mindsets in a more subtle way. Participants were presented with what they believed was an advertisement. The advertisement exhorted the participants to think about themselves in terms of who they are becoming, or who they are now. At the end of the study participants choose one of two snack bars (hedonic vs. prudent). Participants in the becoming mindset were more likely to choose the prudent snack, whereas those in the being mindset showed the opposite (X²(1, N=84) = 5.72, p = .01).

Study 5 (n=71, age_mean=48.57) Shoppers were addressed before entering a convenience store and asked to read an advertisement that elicited a being or becoming self-definition (as in Study 4). After they completed their shopping trip, they were given a choice of a snack as a reward. Shoppers in the being mindset preferred the indulgent option (i.e. chocolate bar), whereas shoppers in the becoming mindset preferred the prudent option (i.e. apple or no snack), (X²(1, N=71) = 4.12, p = .04).

Study 6 (n=103, age_mean=24.18) examines how lower construal level (i.e. being mindset) will lead to greater valuation of a hedonically-framed product while the higher construal level (i.e. becoming mindset) will lead to greater valuation of a prudently-framed product. Accordingly, when the advertisement and mindset matched, participants evaluated a car more positively, than when they mismatched (t(99) = 2.17, p = .03).

“An Obligation to Work or an Opportunity to Play? The Influence of Task Construal and Task Completion on Regulatory Behavior”
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One of the most popular explanations of self-control failures is the depletion hypothesis (Muraven and Baumeister 2000). This hypothesis posits that people control their behavior by drawing on a limited supply of regulatory resources. We propose a different approach to understanding regulatory behavior. We argue that effortful behaviors can be construed as “work” or as “play”. When they are construed as an obligation to work, the person engages in the behavior in anticipation of a subsequent reward: work is a means to an end. Interruptions to the effortful behavior encourage a person to continue to work (so as to deserve the reward), whereas completing the behavior encourages the person to seek the reward. When regulatory behaviors are construed as an opportunity to play, completing the behavior is the reward in itself: the work is play (work is the reward). Interruptions to the behavior encourage a person to find alternative means of being rewarded (i.e., self-regulation declines), whereas completing the behavior provides an opportunity for gratification. We hypothesize that low (high) self-control people are more likely to interpret behaviors as obligations to work (opportunities to play). Completion (vs. interruption) of a self-regulatory task should encourage less (more) subsequent regulatory behavior for low (high) self-control people. Our studies tested a task that required self-control at time 1, a manipulation of this task as incomplete or completed, and a task in which participants could exert as much self-control as they wanted at time 2. We also measured self-control as an individual trait.

In study 1, participants were given M&M’s and Skittles and asked to put one piece of each in their mouth and take it out. They answered questions about the candies, were asked to hold one piece of each in their finger, and answered additional questions about the candies. Participants were either told that they were done with the first study (completed task condition) or to advance in order to answer additional questions about their behavior as consumers (incomplete task condition). Time 2 involved a 20-minute filler task, which was done while the rest of the candies were in participants’ work stations. We weighed how much candy participants ate and used this as a measure of regulatory behavior. Low self-control participants ate more candy in the completed task condition (M=34 grams) than in the incomplete task condition (M=22 grams). High self-control participants ate more candy in the incomplete task condition (M=40 grams) than in the completed task condition (M=29 grams), all p’s<.05. A pretest indicated that low self-control participants saw the time 1 task as more of an obligation to work than high self-control participants. Because low (vs. high) self-control participants saw the task as an obligation to work, completion led them to seek more rewarding behaviors.

In study 2, we show that if a task is framed as “work”, this will lead everyone to perform less self-regulation. In one condition, we replicated the results of study 1. In a second condition, we asked participants to choose the minimum amount of M&M’s and Skittles they needed in order to perform the initial candy task. Making participants abide by a minimum would lead them to see the task as obligation to work. In this condition, all participants ate more candy in the completed (M=35 grams) than in the incomplete task condition (M=24 grams), all p’s<.05.

In study 3, we show that a task can be framed as “play”, which will lead everyone to perform more self-regulation. When the time 1 task was said to be a fun task (the sentence “this is a fun task” was added to the instructions), all participants performed more regulatory behavior in the completed than in the incomplete task condition.

In summary, low self-control and high self-control people construe their worlds differently. Low self-control people perceive many behaviors, especially regulatory behaviors, as taxing and difficult (depleting). Upon completion of a taxing behavior, a low self-control person is more likely to exhibit regulatory failure. High self-control people perceive many behaviors as challenging and rewarding. Upon completion of a challenging behavior, the high self-control person is likely to sustain regulatory behavior. Most importantly, our manipulations show conditions under which people in general are more prone to self-regulatory failure, and conditions under which we can encourage increased regulatory behavior despite of people’s natural self-control tendencies.

“The Impact of Positive Affect on Cognitive Decision Making Strategies: The Case of Mental Accounting”
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Mental accounting is a widely adopted cognitive method of keeping track of spending and controlling consumption (e.g., Prelec and Loewenstein 1998). Individuals often use mental accounts to constrain spending by allocating budget limits (Heath and Soll 1996). Cheema and Soman (2006) demonstrate that motivated individuals may depart from mental accounting predictions when there is sufficient ambiguity in how an expense should be categorized (e.g., a restaurant experience may be categorized as either a food or an entertainment expense), via a process of malleable mental accounting. Our primary objective is to understand the role of positive affect on this process of mental accounting.

Although affect can impact judgment and decision making directly (cf. Pham 1998), in the context of financial budgeting, the associated regulation mechanisms (i.e., coping with heightened levels of affect) may reduce one’s ability to engage in malleable mental accounting. In summary, we aim to: (1) investigate the influence of positive affect on spending, (2) examine the moderat-
ing role of expense ambiguity, and (3) explore the underlying mechanisms.

Predictions. In the past, the research on the role of mood regulation in self-control has focused on regulation of negative mood and generally, demonstrated the superiority of the neutral state (Tice and Bratslavsky 2000). However, in the context of mental accounting, one’s cognitive resources are least taxed and available for flexible categorization when an individual is in a neutral state. Positive mood has been shown to lead to enhanced cognitive elaboration as well as greater efficiency in decision making (e.g., Aspinwall 1998; Pham 1998). More importantly, however, supporters of the hedonic view on affect regulation (cf. Martin 2001) would predict that relative to a neutral state, when one is in a positive mood, their motivation to seek immediate hedonic pleasure should be lower. Consequently, in the presence of expense ambiguity, those in a less positive (neutral) state should be more likely to engage in motivated reasoning in order to construct justifications for spending. Hence, we predict that expense ambiguity should moderate the effect of positive mood on spending. We tested these predictions in two studies.

Study 1. Our studies adapt the procedure developed by Cheema and Soman (2006). A description of budgetary constraints was preceded by an affect manipulation. To test our prediction regarding the effect of positive affect on spending we conducted a 2 (affective states: happy, neutral) × 2 (expense ambiguity: low [comedy show—entertainment expense], high [restaurant—food or entertainment expense]) ANOVA with likelihood of spending as a dependent variable. The findings supported our prediction, as only participants in a neutral state took advantage of expense ambiguity and engaged in malleable mental accounting leading to higher likelihood of spending.

All participants also rated the restaurant expense as a ‘typical food expense’. We then asked participants to imagine that they did go to the restaurant and invited them to predict pleasure from spending using three-items which were later combined into an index. We analyzed the index and the typicality ratings as two independent mediators of the relationship between affect and spending likelihood. Both mediation analyses were significant based on Sobel tests, suggesting that positive affect differentially impacted expense categorization and hedonic motivation, which subsequently influenced spending.

Next, we subjected our data to a simultaneous dual mediation analysis with both mediators in the model. While the index of anticipated pleasure from spending fully mediated the relationship, categorization of the restaurant expense as typical food became insignificant. This analysis provided initial evidence suggesting that the influence of positive affect on mental accounting and spending cannot be explained by the inhibitory role of affect in cognitive processing alone, but is also a consequence of differences in hedonic motivation.

Study 2. We designed our second study to rule out the possibility that failure on the part of individuals in a positive mood to engage in malleable mental accounting is simply a consequence of more efficient heuristic processing. We adapted our previous procedure slightly by keeping the expense ambiguous across all conditions. Here, our focal dependent variables were the time it took participants to categorize the restaurant expense as a ‘typical food’ expense and the time they spent completing the task. Our data revealed that participants in a positive affective (vs. neutral) state actually took longer to respond to the expense categorization question and to complete the task. These findings are consistent with a “greater-elaboration model” which predicts that “people take longer to read mood-congruent information compared to mood-incongruent information, presumably due to greater elaboration of the congruent material” (Pury 2004, p. 156).

As a part of an ongoing research effort to further investigate the impact of affect on malleable mental accounting, we are also examining the role of cognitive load in the relationship between expense ambiguity, positive affect, and spending. Here, we anticipate a three-way interaction, so that when cognitive load is high, individuals in a neutral state can no longer justify incurring a hedonic expense, whereas those in a positive affective state may actually engage in affect maintenance resulting in greater likelihood of spending.

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