Winning Through Conflict: When Goal-Conflict Increases Motivation

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People often pursue multiple conflicting goals. According to past literature inter-goal conflict induces difficulty in deciding which goal to pursue, which in turn has a negative effect on goal pursuit. In contrast, we show that experiencing inter-goal conflict and decision difficulty can increase perceived goal importance and lead to higher motivation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One important decision that people make every day is how to balance the pursuit of multiple goals. The decision becomes difficult when striving towards one goal prevents pursuit of other goals in the individual’s goal system (Fishbach and Ferguson 2007; Kruglanski et al. 2002). For instance, a person may wish to get a promotion at work, but also to spend more time with family; one may want to lose weight and enjoy tasty foods, or save money for college and travel the world.

Reconciling the pursuit of multiple conflicting goals is psychologically aversive and induces decision difficulty. A consistent finding in prior literature suggests that goal conflict has a negative effect on goal pursuit, decreasing the likelihood that individuals will strive to achieve the conflicting goals. For example, among a group of smokers that wished to quit smoking, those that perceived their goal to quit smoking as conflicting with their other goals were less successful in quitting relative to those who perceived less conflict (McKeeman and Karoly 1991).

In contrast to past research, we propose that goal conflict can have a positive impact on motivation. Our proposition is based on the finding that subjective experiences of difficulty serve as input into judgment, even when judgment is unrelated to the source of experienced feelings of difficulty (Schwarz 2004). Though subjective difficulty often decreases subsequent evaluations (Novemsky et al. 2007), recent research suggests that it may also have positive effects, such as making products seem more unique (Pochpetsova, Labroo, and Dhar 2010) and instrumental to goal attainment (Labroo and Kim 2009), and increasing the perceived importance of decisions (Sela and Berger 2011). Building on this literature, we propose that subjective experience of difficulty associated with negotiating conflict among one’s goals will influence evaluation of those goals. Just as people expect important decisions to be more difficult than less important decisions (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Sela and Berger 2011), we believe they will expect to experience more conflict when thinking about more versus less important goals. Thus, when people experience goal conflict and associated feelings of difficulty in pursuing multiple goals, they may interpret these feelings of difficulty as a signal of goal importance.

The proposed effect of inter-goal conflict on goal importance has a number of downstream implications for goal-pursuit. The importance of one’s goals is a key driver of commitment and motivation to pursue the goals; as people are more likely to strive towards more important goals (Kruglanski et al. 2002). Thus, if the subjective difficulty associated with goal conflict increases the perceived importance of one’s goals, goal conflict may also increase motivation. Contrary to the previous work that has found inter-goal conflict to have a detrimental effect on goal-pursuit, we propose that people will be more motivated to pursue their goals when they feel the goals are in conflict with each other relative to when they are not.

Across a series of three studies we find consistent support for our proposition. Our first study tested the impact of goal conflict on perceptions of goal importance. Participants read a scenario where they were going on a ski trip with friends and also had an upcoming quiz in class. In the low conflict condition the quiz was three weeks before the ski trip, but in the high conflict condition, the quiz was immediately after the ski trip. Among several unrelated measures, participants rated importance of “academic success” and “spending time with friends”. As we expected, participants rated both goals (to do well in school and socialize with friends) as more important when conflict was high versus low (p < .05).

In study 2, we tested the second part of our proposition: the effect of goal conflict on motivation. Participants were asked to list two goals that they were currently pursuing. Half of participants were asked to list two examples of how those goals were in conflict with each other (high conflict condition); the remaining half were not asked for any examples (low conflict condition). After some filler tasks, we measured how conflicted participants felt and their motivation to pursue both goals. As we expected, participants in high conflict condition were more motivated to pursue their goals (F(1, 25) = 5.98, p < .05).

Finally, Study 3 replicated the positive impact of goal conflict on motivation and showed that enhanced perceptions of goal importance mediated this effect. We activated a performance goal and a hedonic goal for all participants by asking them to endorse a series of statements related to each goal (e.g., “I want to achieve success”, “I want to relax and enjoy life”). Goal conflict was manipulated by asking participants to either list two (high conflict condition) or eight (low conflict condition) examples of how these goals conflicted. Listing eight examples is expected to be more difficult, thus creating the perception that the performance and hedonic goals were in less conflict relative to the two examples condition (Schwarz et al. 1991). Next, all participants indicated their willingness to pay for several goal-related products (e.g., highlighters, movie tickets) and completed a series of measures assessing their motivation to pursue the conflicting goals and perceptions of goal importance. Results showed that participants were willing to pay more for the goal-related products when they perceived more conflict among their goals (F(1, 68) = 3.72, p < .06). Consistent with previous results, goal conflict increased perceptions of goal importance (F(1, 67) = 5.56, p < .05) and motivation. Finally, the positive effect of goal conflict on motivation was mediated by perceived importance of both goals.

Taken together these studies demonstrate that inter-goal conflict may have a positive impact on goal-pursuit. Contrary to previous work, we find that experiencing conflict among one’s goals can actually increase motivation to pursue those goals. In particular, experiencing conflict among one’s goals enhances the perceived importance of those goals, which in turn increases motivation to pursue them.

The Obligation to Choose

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In his book Powers of Freedom, sociologist Nikolas Rose (1999) writes:

Modern individuals are not merely ‘free to choose,’ but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make. Their choices are, in their turn, seen as realizations of the attributes of the choosing person—expressions of personality—and reflect back upon the person who has made them. (p. 87)

This talk considers the obligation to choose from a psychological perspective, exploring its origins and its consequences for consumers today.

Academics and practitioners alike have historically assumed that our choices are based upon our preferences, and that these preferences are derived directly from our self-interests, which are apparent to one and all. However, decades of research have now demonstrated repeatedly and compellingly, across a variety of dif-