Conquering Conflict: Multifinal Means in Multiple-Goal Pursuit

Jordan Etkin, University of Maryland, USA
Francine Espinoza, European School of Management and Technology, Germany
Anastasiya Pocheptsova, University of Maryland, USA

When pursuing multiple goals, multifinal means allow multiple goals to be pursued simultaneously. We propose that being in a positive mood during multiple-goal pursuit affects perceptions of means to goal attainment, with negative consequences for motivation. Across three studies we show that positive mood decreases perceptions of multifinality and motivation to use multifinal means during the course of goal-pursuit.

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(no consolation, high-value consolation good, low-value consolation) design. Participants recruited using Amazon’s MTurk system (M(age) =, income =, x% male) were first placed in a low self-esteem mindset by writing a short essay about a failure experience in their life (White & Lehman, 2005). Subsequently, they read a scenario where a neighbor had won a 3D Plasma television, while they had either won nothing, won only a subsequent opportunity to win either a smaller, 2D flat-screen TV (high-value consolation) or won a chance to win a traditional CRT television (low-value consolation). They were then asked to generate either positive or negative counterfactuals regarding their situation (White & Lehman, 2005). As predicted, in the no consolation condition as well as in the high-value consolation, positive counterfactuals conditions, the sour grapes effect was replicated. However, having participants generate negative counterfactuals reversed the sour grapes effect for high-value consolation participants, such that their motivation to purchase the envied TV was significantly greater than in the no consolation prize condition.

Taken together, results from these studies support the theory that consideration of a high-value consolation opportunity can decrease motivation because the good substitute makes positive counterfactuals highly accessible. Interestingly, this offers a means by which marketers may squeeze wine from sour grapes. First, if relatively valuable consolation opportunities are available, they may be able to cue negative counterfactuals in the shopping environment. Second, marketers may both save money and enhance motivation, by providing only a token item to offset the potentially negative consequences of envy.

Feeling Good at the Right Time

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It has long been established that people are happy when they find out they attained their goals. Research has not addressed, however, whether people hold expectations about the timing of when they would learn that they attained their goals. For example, a job applicant may expect to learn the results of the application via an official offer letter to be sent, say, a week after the final interview. But sometimes attainment news arrives sooner than expected. An HR representative may contact the job applicant with positive news before the official offer letter is sent. How do people experience premature good news? Different lines of research appear to support divergent predictions.

On the one hand, if emotion is viewed solely as a reaction to surprise (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1990; Orthony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; see also Wilson & Gilbert, 2008), one might expect that premature news would lead to heightened positive emotion. This is because premature news is surprising not only due to its content but also due to its timing. Our research, however, predicts the opposite. We hypothesize that when news arrives prematurely, people hold back positive emotion. Specifically, we predict that compared to those who receive timely news, people who receive premature news would be less happy both when they receive premature news, and when they eventually receive timely news.

We motivate our predictions with self-regulatory theory. Specifically, people typically experience positive emotion following goal attainment and prior to disengaging from the goal (Higgins, 1987; Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005). But when people perceive good news to be premature, they may not want to disengage too early. Accordingly, we hypothesize that holding back positive emotion would lead to sustained engagement in the goal.

We further hypothesize that holding back positive emotion has consequences in terms of goal value. Previous research has shown that affective cues influence goal value (Aarts, Custers, & Holland, 2007; Ferguson, 2008). Since premature news leads to the holding back of positive emotion, it consequently should lead to the devaluation of the goal.

We present three studies to support our hypotheses. In study 1, participants applied to a mock summer internship. In one condition, they received the results of their applications via hardcopy letter. In another condition, participants received the results via an unofficial computer message before receiving the official letter. We find that compared to those who received only the official letter, participants who received the premature computer message were less happy both when they received the computer message (an aversion to feeling happy too early) and when they eventually received the official letter (when they were no longer surprised).

In study 2, we replicate our finding that premature news leads to the holding back of positive emotion, as well as establish the link between emotion and goal value. Specifically, participants played a game of rock-paper-scissors in which they were told they had to win two out of three rounds. Premature news was manipulated by obligating participants in one condition to play three rounds even when they won the first two rounds. Participants in the second condition stopped playing after winning the first two rounds. The results showed that participants who had to play a third round despite winning the first two rounds were less happy after the second round than participants who won the first two rounds and stopped playing. Importantly, participants who were obligated to play three rounds and held back their happiness were also willing to accept less money for the prize they got for winning, a Twix bar.

Study 3 was conducted to replicate our previous findings and establish the link between emotion and goal engagement. Participants played a game in which they had to guess which of three face-down cards was the joker. Premature news was manipulated by letting participants in one condition flip the cards they did not pick, thus informing them that they either won or lost before revealing the identity of the card they picked. In a second condition, participants were not given the opportunity to prematurely flip any card. The results showed that participants who knew ahead of time that they won were less happy than participants who learned of their victory in an official manner. Replicating our goal devaluation finding, mediation analysis showed that participants who held back their happiness also rated winning the game as less important than participants who did not hold back their happiness, with the intensity of positive emotion as the mediator. Finally, as an operationalization of goal engagement, we gave all participants the opportunity to read a passage related to the game for as long as they liked and measured the time they spent doing so. As predicted, participants who held back their happiness also spent more time reading than participants who did not hold back their happiness. Mediation analysis indicated that holding back positive emotion mediated the effect of premature news on longer reading times.

As a whole, the present research shows that people are sensitive not only to the content of attainment information, but also to its timing. In addition, the present research reveals an ironic effect of premature news, namely that premature news leads people to maintain engagement in a goal but to end up valuing it less.

Conquering Conflict: Multifinal Means in Multiple-Goal Pursuit

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often have multiple goals that they wish to pursue at the same time. For example, a person may strive to be successful pro-
professionally, spend time with family, and be healthy. Multiple-goal pursuit is inherently a complex phenomenon, requiring individuals to spread their limited pool of mental, emotional, and physical resources across several different goals (Kruglanski et al. 2002). Such multiple-goal pursuit can create the sense that one’s goals are in conflict, which is a psychologically aversive state that has detrimental consequences for motivation (Emmons and King 1988; Riediger and Freund 2004).

How can people overcome inter-goal conflict and stay motivated to pursue their multiple goals? One way to attenuate the negative impact of inter-goal conflict on multiple-goal pursuit is by using means to goal attainment that are instrumental to the pursuit of not one but multiple goals at the same time. Choosing such “multifinal” means in the course of goal pursuit allows individuals to jointly pursue their multiple conflicting goals, making multifinal means (relative to unifinal means) more highly valued (Chun and Kruglanski 2005; Kruglanski et al. 2002).

Previous research on single-goal pursuit has found that positive mood signals effectiveness of goal-directed behavior and increases motivation to pursue the active goal (Louro, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2007). We propose that in the context of multiple goals, positive affect will also influence consumers’ ability to perceive means as multifinal, which will in turn negatively affect multiple-goal pursuit. Positive affect has been found to result in recognition of more, and more different, aspects or features of items (Isen et al. 1985; Isen et al. 1987), giving rise to a greater recognition of differences and increasing the complexity and richness of a set (Kahn and Isen 1993). Applying these findings to the context of multiple goals, we argue that positive mood would increase perceptions of inter-goal conflict. Further, such an increase in perception of goal-conflict would lead to increased difficulty in perceiving any single means as instrumental to several conflicting goals. Therefore, we predict that positive mood will make it more difficult to perceive multifinality among means to goal attainment, leading to lower motivation to pursue multiple goals.

Across several studies, we find support for our propositions. In study 1, we tested our basic proposition that positive mood increases perceptions of inter-goal conflict. Mood was manipulated by varying the outcome of an Ultimatum Game (positive mood = accept offer, negative mood = reject offer). Next, all participants were primed with three goals (a performance goal, a pleasure goal, and a self-improvement goal) and then reported their perceptions of conflict among the goals. To measure inter-goal conflict, we timed participants as they listed as many means as they could think of related to the three goals. Consistent with previous research that suggests inter-goal conflict has a detrimental impact on motivation, we reasoned that participants who experienced heightened inter-goal conflict (in the positive mood condition) would have more difficulty completing the means listing task relative to participants who experienced less goal conflict (i.e. negative mood). Consistent with this logic, it took participants in a positive mood more time (in seconds) to list an equivalent number of means as did participants in a negative mood ($M_{positive} = 125.5$ vs. $M_{negative} = 97.02$).

Study 2 directly investigated the effect of positive mood on perceptions of means multifinality. Mood was manipulated by showing participants one of two video clips pretested to induce positive vs. negative mood. Next, instead of priming goals, we asked participants to list five important goals they were currently interested in pursuing. Finally, we asked participants to list (up to 10) means to achieve their goals and rate the extent to which the listed means served multiple goals. As we expected, participants in a positive mood perceived the means they listed as less multifinal than participants in a negative mood ($M_{positive} = 4.9$ vs. $M_{negative} = 5.76$).

Study 2 showed that positive mood makes perceiving means multifinality more difficult. As a result, we reason that positive mood should also decrease effort invested in using available means to goal attainment. However, this effect should be attenuated if individuals are made aware of means multifinality. Consistent with previous research that suggests positive mood is beneficial for goal pursuit (Custers and Aarts 2005; Fishbach and LaBroo 2007), we expect positive mood to increase motivation in multiple-goal pursuit when available means to goal attainment are explicitly described as multifinal. In study 3 we test this reasoning by giving participants a means to multiple-goal attainment and measure the energy devoted to its use. After watching the sad versus happy videos, participants were primed with three goals (the same goals as used in study 1), and then were presented with an anagram task that was described as either unifinal (helping to achieve the first primed goal) or multifinal (helping to achieve all three primed goals). Motivation to pursue the primed goals was measured via the time participants persisted in the anagram task. We find that participants in a positive (vs. negative) mood persisted less in the task when it was presented as being unifinal ($M_{positive} = 133.88$ vs. $M_{negative} = 196.15$), but they persisted more than participants in a negative mood when the task was described as multifinal ($M_{positive} = 191.54$ vs. $M_{negative} = 159.96$), supporting our prediction.

Taken together, our findings support our proposition that positive mood leads to greater perceptions of inter-goal conflict and affects the perceptions of and use of multifinal means. Our findings contribute to the literatures on mood and motivation by expanding our understanding of the interplay between emotions, means, and goal-pursuit in the context of multiple goals.