The Uniqueness Heuristic: a Preference For Unique Options For a Single Goal

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We found that people choose unique options for a single goal and ordinary options for multiple goals. Thus, they prefer uniqueness for either Goal A or Goal B, but not for Goal A+B. We demonstrated this preference reversal in various consumer contexts and explored its underlying explanation.

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Anomalies in Goal Pursuit
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Paper #1: Opportunity Cost Neglect in Goal Pursuit Under Uncertainty
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Cade Massey, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Paper #2: The Uniqueness Heuristic: A Preference for Unique Options for a Single Goal
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Paper #3: Blind to All Else: The Role of Mindsets in Multiple-Goal Pursuit
Anastasiya Pocheptsova, University of Maryland, USA
Jordan Etkin, University of Maryland, USA
Ravi Dhar, Yale University, USA

Paper #4: Space, Time and Getting Things Done: The Role of Mindsets in Goal Pursuit
Dilip Soman, University of Toronto, Canada

SESSION OVERVIEW
People generally make purchases with a specific goal in mind. But can they effectively attain the goal? While economists believe that consumers have stable and well-defined preferences about desired ends and act in ways that reliably achieves these ends, psychologists find that people do not always pursue goals in a rational and effective manner. In this session, we explore such anomalies in goal pursuit. We aim to highlight findings that demonstrate instances when consumers’ choices and behaviors violate normative theories and reveal the cognitive mechanism underlying these anomalies. Specifically, the first two papers show that consumers’ goal pursuit behaviors appear inconsistent with rational behavior axioms, whereas the last two papers focus on how contextual cues drive consumers to behave differently under similar goal pursuit situations.

The first paper, by Derek Koehler and Cade Massey, asks whether consumers seek to maximize their ultimate utility from goal pursuit. In particular, the authors study goal abandonment and investigate whether consumers neglect opportunity costs in a pursuit of a goal with uncertainty. Normatively, if goal attainment is uncertain, consumers should consider giving up their current goal pursuit at some point in order to maximize their gain and minimize their loss. However, the authors found that consumers tend to over-persist on their goals, forsaking opportunities offered by alternative pursuits.

The second paper, by Luxi Shen and Ayelet Fishbach, examines choice consistency and focuses on consumers’ preference for uniqueness in a goal-based choice. They identified the uniqueness heuristic such that consumers choose unique options for one single goal but defer from that option when choosing for multiple goals. This heuristic leads to a preference reversal: Consumers prefer a unique option either for Goal A or for Goal B, but when choosing for both Goal A and B together, they prefer an ordinary option.

The third paper, by Anastasiya Pocheptsova, Jordan Etkin, and Ravi Dhar, considers how goal-related mindsets affect the approach that consumers adopt for multiple-goal pursuit. Although previous literature suggests that consumers faced with multiple goals usually switch between pursuing their multiple goals, their findings showed that consumers at times prefer to highlight the pursuit of one of their goals at the expense of other co-active goals. They further identified the role of implemental mindset (vs. deliberative mindset) in driving this effect.

The last paper, by Dilip Soman, takes an integrative perspective on how incidental contextual cues effect consumers’ initiation of goal pursuit. In one of his studies, he found that the patience (commitment) of consumers in a queue depends on whether they were already inside a queue guide area (a visual boundary of the task system) regardless of the length of the area, though normatively the decision of dropping a queue should be a function of the absolute time/distance expected to wait. Based on consistent findings across the domains of space and time, the author develops a new framework for understanding the interplay between incidental contextual cues and the implemental mindset.

Together, these four interconnected papers provide interesting perspectives on when consumers’ goal pursuit decisions and behaviors appear inconsistent, explore the cognitive structure underlying the goal pursuit anomalies, and specify when the anomalies may help consumers effectively attain their goals and when they may not. The papers yield insights into consumer goal pursuit across a wide range of settings, and carry theoretical as well as practical implications for consumer research. Data collection in all papers is complete and all participants have agreed to present, should the session be accepted. The chairs will facilitate audience discussion drawing connections between the session topic, anomalies in goal pursuit, and other areas of consumer research.

Opportunity Cost Neglect in Goal Pursuit Under Uncertainty

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer choices are often made in the context of goal pursuit. Weight-loss products are purchased on the basis of their anticipated contribution to progress toward a weight-loss goal; financial investment products are selected in the context of a retirement or other savings goal; subscriptions to online dating services are made with the goal of establishing a romantic relationship. One notable feature these examples have in common is that the goal’s achievability is uncertain.

Much of the recent work on decision making in goal pursuit has focused on self-regulatory mechanisms that influence trade-offs between short-term expenditures (e.g., of effort) and long-term rewards associated with goal achievement (e.g., Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999; Fishbach and Dhar 2005). A simplifying assumption typically made in such research is that the goal in question can be achieved and is worth achieving (i.e., benefits of goal achievement outweigh its costs). On such analyses, the primary implications of goal proximity or rate of progress are motivational, in that willingness to expend effort to make further progress toward a goal may vary with its proximity and how progress toward it is construed (e.g., Fishbach, Dhar, and Zhang 2006).

In many decisions we face, however, there is uncertainty about a goal’s achievability. There may come a point at which a goal may not be worth continued pursuit because the anticipated benefits of goal achievement are outweighed by its costs. Often such uncertainty can be at least partly resolved over time as progress toward the goal is made: One can calculate whether, in light of this progress and the cost at which it was attained, the expected returns of achieving the
goal justify the costs of its continued pursuit. Optimal decision making, on this account, relies on belief revision, i.e., reassessment of whether the current goal should be continue to be pursued, or should instead be abandoned. Suboptimal goal pursuit behavior, then, can arise from miscalculation of cost and benefits of continued goal pursuit (i.e., leading to adoption of a suboptimal goal-pursuit strategy), as well as from the more familiar self-regulation challenges the underlie failure to execute an otherwise optimal goal-pursuit strategy. We suggest that the problem-solving aspect of goal pursuit, that is, how costs and benefits are and ought optimally to be integrated in decisions about whether to continue to pursue a goal, has been relatively understudied.

In the present research, therefore, we investigate decisions about whether to abandon or continue pursuit of a goal whose achievability is uncertain. Typically, decisions of this type are faced sequentially, as progress toward the goal is made and can be used to update the likelihood and value of goal achievement (e.g., an entrepreneur who faces continual decisions about whether to make further investments in a business project). Appropriate responsiveness to progress feedback is needed for optimal decisions -- one must balance the risk of abandoning the goal too early against pursuing it too long.

A challenge in studying this issue is identifying optimal decision-making. We build on the classic ball-and-urn paradigm to develop a task allowing the quantification of goal pursuit’s costs and benefits. With this approach it is possible to gauge any systematic bias toward over-persistence or under-persistence. In each round, one of two urns containing red and green balls is randomly selected. Participants--who know the composition of each urn but not which one was selected for the current round--choose whether or not to draw balls from it. If the participant draws a target number of green balls (the “goal”), he or she receives a payoff. Draws are made without replacement, at a fixed cost deducted from an initial endowment for the round. The challenge is that only one of the two urns contains enough green balls to achieve the goal. The participant may quit the round at any time and keep what remains of the initial endowment. Thus, the participant must continually assess whether to persist or, alternatively, to abandon the goal. Multiple rounds of the game are played (with one randomly-selected round played for real money), allowing assessment of whether goal pursuit decisions improve with experience.

In multiple studies we investigate the impact of reward size and probability on participant behavior. We also evaluate performance in a variation of the paradigm in which participants can abandon urns in exchange for draws from other urns, rather than for a fixed payment. Across all studies we find a strong tendency to over-persist. That is, participants invest too much in trying to achieve success on the current urn, relative to an optimal benchmark suggesting that expected returns of goal achievement are outweighed by the anticipated cost of achieving it. This tendency is exacerbated by insufficient sensitivity to reward size and probability, and is worse in studies in which the foregone benefit is additional opportunity rather than a fixed payment.

Across studies we find the largest bias when a decision-maker receives “bad news” (makes relatively slow progress) in the early stages of goal pursuit. Optimal play requires abandonment in such circumstances. As a result, a Bayesian player is certain to sometimes abandon (ex-post) achievable goals (favorable urns), making up for it via more future opportunities. Our participants, on the other hand, rarely mistakenly abandon an achievable goal (favorable urn), but at the cost of leaving themselves far fewer opportunities for future goal achievement. There is no evidence from our studies that this bias is attenuated with task experience. We suggest that cost-benefit trade-offs between current (or focal) and future (or alternative) opportunities is a fundamental tension in goal pursuit and ripe for additional psychological investigation.

**The Uniqueness Heuristic:**

**A Preference for Unique Options for a Single Goal**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

When painting their bedroom, will homeowners select spring tulip red or beige? Would they make a different choice when painting their living room? This research explores people’s preferences for unique versus non-unique choice options.

Previous research has examined several factors that contribute to a preference for non-unique options, including a desire to reduce risk (Simonson and Tversky 1992), to make an easily justifiable choice (Shafir, Simonson, and Tversky 1993; Simonson 1989), and to conform to a perceived social norm (Asch 1955; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). In contrast, other research has documented people’s need for uniqueness (Ariely and Levav 2000; Berger and Heath 2007; Tian and McKenzie 2001), which leads to a preference for unique options.

In light of the existing research, we identify a “uniqueness heuristic” -- a stronger preference for unique options when choosing for a single goal than when choosing for multiple goals. We explain the uniqueness heuristic as the trade-off between multi-finality (i.e., how many goals one option serves) and instrumentality (i.e., how well one option serves each of the goals) in the cognitive network of goal system (Kruglanski et al. 2002; Zhang, Fishbach, and Kruglanski 2007). According to our analysis, unique options appear highly instrumental to a few goals, whereas non-unique options appear less instrumental but can serve many goals.

We further predict a preference reversal: What people choose for each single goal alone differs from what they choose for all the single goals together. For example, people may choose a unique restaurant either to dine with friend A or to dine with friend B, but choose a non-unique restaurant for dinner with both A and B.

In six studies involving different choice contexts, we tested the uniqueness heuristic with subtle and naturalistic goal activation, ruled out alternative explanations such as risk aversion, and explored the underlying mechanism.

In Study 1, we adopted the conceptual definition of uniqueness -- atypicality, that is, how remote one option is from the prototype of its category. Specifically, we designed a list of ice-creams with unique flavors (orange dark chocolate ice-cream and rosly vanilla ice-cream) and non-unique flavors (chocolate and vanilla). In the weeks around the Valentine’s Day, we asked customers at a campus cafe to think of a friend who might be telling her felling to her crush and choose an ice-cream for one of the following purposes: (single goal a) to celebrate she entered a new relationship, (single goal b) to comfort her because she was rejected by her crush, and (multiple goals) to either celebrate or comfort because they were still waiting for her.

We found that the atypical (unique) ice-cream flavors were preferred in both single goal cases but the typical (non-unique) ice-cream flavors were preferred in the multiple goal case.

The rest of the studies experimentally manipulated the uniqueness of an option by configuring different choice sets. The same option can be of low frequency and thus appears unique in one choice set (e.g., a French restaurant among many Italian restaurants), but of high frequency and thus appears non-unique in another choice set (e.g., the French restaurant among many other French restaurants). In Study 2, participants chose a restaurant for dinner with one friend (single goal) or five friends (multiple goals). We found a preference...
for the unique restaurant in the choice set (either one French restaurant among Italian restaurants or one Italian restaurant among French restaurants) for one friend but not for five friends.

Similarly, in Study 3, participants preferred a unique suitcase (either soft-sided among hard-sided, or hard-sided among soft-sided) for one upcoming trip (single goal) but not for multiple upcoming trips (multiple goals).

In Study 4, we examined choices with real consequence. Participants chose and sent a card to their family members. This experiment again confirmed the uniqueness heuristic and suggested a preference reversal: Participants preferred the uniquely-shaped card for their aunt alone and for their uncle alone, but not for both their aunt and uncle.

In Study 5, we ruled out an alternative explanation, risk aversion, by comparing choice for one goal versus one out of multiple goals. Participants selected the unique wine (either Californian among Australian or Australian among Californian) when shopping for one future occasion (single goal) but not when shopping for one out of four potential future occasions (multiple goals). The real outcome risk for experiencing a unique option was equal in both conditions and thus our finding suggested that the uniqueness heuristic cannot be explained by risk aversion.

Finally, in Study 6, we examined the underlying mechanism of the uniqueness heuristic. Participants chose apples, either red among green or green among red, for one experimenter (single goal) or for one of six experimenters (multiple goals) and made predictions on how much the apples would be enjoyed either before or after choosing. We found that participants used the uniqueness heuristic when choosing before predicting but not after. We also found that participants based their choice for single goals on their predictions regardless of whether they chose before or after predicting and their choice for multiple goals on their predictions only when they make predictions first. These findings confirmed the uniqueness heuristic, revealed its mechanism, and suggested that thinking about the instrumentality of each option before choosing can prevent the preference reversal by the uniqueness heuristic.

**Blind to All Else:**

The Role of Mindsets in Multiple-Goal Pursuit

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is now well established that consumer behavior is goal-driven (Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994; Kruglanski et al. 2002; Markman and Brendl 2005). Consumers typically have multiple goals that they try to pursue at the same time, for example, simultaneously wishing to be fit and to eat tasty foods, and to socialize with friends and achieve greater success in the workplace. When consumers maintain multiple goals, they will often temporarily disengage from initial pursuit of one goal to attend to their other co-active goals, a dynamic related to their non-target goal (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen and Steller, 1990; Chandran and Morwitz 2005).

We argue that in an implemental mindset for one of multiple co-active goals will lead consumers to inhibit the activation of other co-active goals, decreasing the likelihood of deviating from target goal pursuit (goal shielding; Shah et al. 2002). Consequently, consumers will highlight a single goal at the expense of their other co-active goals, affecting choice of goal-related products, or means, to multiple-goal attainment. Specifically, we predict that consumers will repeatedly select means related to the goal associated with an implemental mindset, forgoing opportunities to balance multiple-goal pursuit by alternating between means related to several of their co-active goals. We further argue that implemental mindsets will affect consumers’ preferences for products that would allow them to simultaneously pursue multiple co-active goals (i.e., “multifinal means”). While previous literature has shown increased preference for such means in multiple-goal contexts (Chun et al. 2011, Kopetz et al. 2011), we propose that consumers in implemental mindset would be less likely to prefer multifinal means as a consequence of highlighting the pursuit of only one of their several co-active goals.

Five studies provide support for these propositions. Study 1 shows that being in an implemental (vs. deliberative) mindset for one of two co-active goals results in a decrease in the accessibility of other co-active goals. In a word search task designed to measure goal accessibility, participants in an implemental (vs. deliberative) mindset for one of two goals (i.e., the target goal) found fewer words related to their non-target goal (M<sub>implemental</sub> = 1.31, M<sub>deliberative</sub> = 1.01; F(1, 138) = 8.89, p < .01). Studies 2a and 2b examine the effect of mindsets on highlighting in the sequential choice of products. In study 2a we show that participants in an implemental (vs. deliberative) mindset for one of two co-active goals were more likely to repeatedly choose products consistent with only that goal, disrupting the process of balancing in multiple-goal pursuit (preference for second product: M<sub>implemental</sub> = 78.9% vs. M<sub>deliberative</sub> = 33.3%; χ² = 7.84, p < .01). Study 2b extends this finding by demonstrating that consumers in an implemental mindset for one of their multiple co-active goals decline opportunities to pursue their other goals, even when such opportunities do not affect the pursuit of the target goal. Specifically, we show that participants in an implemental (vs. deliberative) mindset are more likely to postpone choice than to choose an option consistent with their other co-active goal (M<sub>implemental</sub> = 95% vs. M<sub>deliberative</sub> = 69%; χ² = 4.07, p < .05).

The next two studies demonstrate the effect of mindsets on preference for multifinal means. Study 3a shows that in a simultaneous-choice paradigm, consumers in an implemental mindset are less likely to prefer multifinal product assortments than are consumers in a deliberative mindset. Specifically, when given the option to construct a balanced product assortment to pursue two co-active goals (health and indulgence), participants in an implemental mindset favored their target health goal (number of products selected: M<sub>healthy</sub> = 6.52 vs. M<sub>indulgent</sub> = 4.30; F(1, 135) = 25.97, p < .001), whereas participants in a deliberative mindset favored a more balanced product assortment (M<sub>healthy</sub> = 6.01 vs. M<sub>indulgent</sub> = 5.36; F(1, 135) = 2.06, p > .1). Finally, study 3b extends this finding to a consequential choice setting by showing that consumers in an implemental (vs. deliberative) mindset for one goal are less likely to select an option that allows for the simultaneous pursuit of their multiple co-active goals (M<sub>implemental</sub> = 37% vs. M<sub>deliberative</sub> = 62.5%; χ²[1] = 4.18, p = .04).

This research makes several contributions to past work on goal-related mindsets and the dynamics of multiple-goal pursuit. First, we
identify implemental mindset as an important boundary condition to previously established dynamics of balancing in multiple-goal pursuit. Second, we show that consumer mindsets moderate the established preference for means that help consumers pursue multiple goals at the same time; despite having multiple co-active goals, consumers in an implemental mindset for one of those goals are less likely to use multifinal means. Taken together, our research extends current knowledge of the dynamics of multiple-goal pursuit and of the role played by goal-related mindsets in influencing consumer choice.

Space, Time and Getting Things Done: The Role of Mindsets in Goal Pursuit

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The achievement of most behavioral goals is preceded by a phase in which consumers approach the goal over space and time. In this stream of research, I study goal pursuit during this phase of approach and address the question of how consumers’ goal commitment and implementation activity is affected by their proximity to the goal. Results from both the domain of time (Tu and Soman 2012) and space (Zhao, Lee, and Soman 2012) show that consumers tend to partition the approach into distinct categories - a “later and there” category in which the outcome is spatially and temporally distant and a “now and here” category in which it is proximal. The categorization process can be facilitated by any cues in the environment that facilitate perceptual, semantic or conceptual similarities. In the domain of space, for example, we find that a space that is labeled “inside,” or space that is demarcated by the use of area rugs and queue guides is more likely to be categorized as proximal to the goal. In the domain of time, categorization is facilitated by duration markers – events like the end of the month or year, or other salient episodes in consumers’ lifetimes (e.g., a birthday, the end of an academic term) such that outcomes that happen before the salient marker are categorized as “now” and those that will happen after the marker are categorized as “later.”

Prior research has also documented that consumer’s cognitive processing changes as a function of their distance from the goal. For instance, Lewin (1926), Heckenhausen (1987) and Gollwitzer (2012) have all made the distinction between the motivation phase [a phase where the consumer plans and strategizes] and the volition phase [when tactics are executed to get the desired outcome]. Gollwitzer (2012) and others (e.g., Xu and Wyer 2010) use the term mindset to capture these differences. In a deliberative mindset, the consumer plans; in an implemental mindset, the consumer does. An implemental mindset can be characterized by the willingness to make and commit to a choice, by a sense of optimism about achieving the desired outcome, and by heightened action orientation more generally. Xu and Wyer (2010) argue that implemental mindsets are triggered by the activation of procedural knowledge, but not much else has been written about when during goal pursuit does a consumer switch from a deliberative mindset to an implemental one.

I propose that categorical processes provide a key input into determining when the mindset transition happens. The physical and temporal movement from the “there and later” to the “here and now” triggers a mindset change. In particular, the urgency associated with the “here and now” puts people in an implemental mindset and hence they are more likely to work to accomplish the final outcome.

Two completed papers provide empirical evidence on which this framework is based. In the domain of time, we find (Tu and Soman, 2012) that when a task that is due D-days from now is due this period as opposed to the next, participants invest greater effort to achieve the task. Likewise in the domain of space, we (Zhao, Lee and Soman 2012) observed people waiting to check into a flight or use an ATM machine, and found that they were very likely to keep all of their documentation (e.g. tickets, passport, ATM card) ready as soon as they stepped onto an area rug in front of the service area. Across 12 experiments in both domains, we find evidence for goal accomplishment, commitment, effort and optimism when consumers are “here and now”.

In this talk, I will

- Develop a new theoretical framework of goal pursuit and mindsets
- Present some selected evidence from two completed papers; Tu and Soman (2012) in the domain of time and Zhao, Lee and Soman (2012) in the domain of space.
- Discuss additional ways of categorization that may produce counter-intuitive results, for example situations in which people who are physically or temporally distant could be more action oriented by the activation of another categorization cue. For example, a professor is more motivated to work on next Tuesday’s class on the preceding Tuesday when s/he is teaching her previous class because all Tuesdays may be categorized as “teaching days.”
- Integrate the findings and discuss implications for consumer behavior, marketers, and policy makers and for the theory of goal pursuit more generally.