From Difficulty to Possibility: Interpretation of Experienced Difficulty, Motivation and Behavior

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People sometimes dig in and other times disengage after experiencing difficulty. Applying identity-based motivation theory, we find that experiencing difficulty as implying impossible stops engagement, while experiencing difficulty as implying importance revs up engagement. Results show that interpreting difficulty as importance represents an alternative strategy to goal achievement.

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Consumer Wellbeing: Interpreting Difficulties, Being Resilient, Extending Forgiveness, and Pursuing a "Fresh Start"

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Paper #1: From Difficulty to Possibility: Interpretation of Experienced Difficulty, Motivation and Behavior

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Paper #2: Rising Every Time They Fall: The Importance and Determinants of Consumer Resilience

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Paper #3: Many Goals–One Choice: Understanding Consumer Forgiveness

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Paper #4: Can A "Fresh Start" Help Consumers Achieve Their Goals?

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Wellbeing as a consumer pursuit is one of the most important discourses of our time (Sointu, 2005). Indeed, wellbeing is tied to a myriad of choices and actions taken in pursuit of immediate and far-reaching goals. Consumers' aspirations to be healthy, wealthy and wise affect choices and goals related to exercise, diet, finances and education. Despite the call to help consumers in their pursuit of wellbeing (Aaker, 2014; Baumgartner and Pieters, 2008; Mick et al. 2012), much remains to be done.

The papers in this session focus on tools that consumers can use to lead adaptive lives and achieve their goals. In the first paper, Daphna Oyserman, Sheida Novin, George C. Smith, Kristen Elmore, and Cecile Nurra use identity-based motivation theory to explain why some people give up and others keep going when they experience difficulties. Based on the results of several experiments, they offer a tool that urges people to, "interpret experienced difficulty as implying that a task is both important and not impossible." In the second paper, Joan Ball and Cait Lamberton take a different path to answer why some people persist in the face of frustrating consumption experiences, while others give up. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative findings, they focus on consumer resilience as a tool, arguing that resilient individuals "use plans as guides for maintaining progress." In the third paper, Yelena Tsarenko, Yuliya Strizhakova, and Cele Otnes, using a case method approach to present their qualitative results, examine a related question of how do consumers respond to disappointments and transgressions. Specifically, they investigate how forgiveness can be used as a tool to help consumers conqueror ruminating thoughts. They uncover key goal pursuits that motivate forgiveness, observing that "consumers consider a variety of personal and relational goals" in deciding to forgive. The fourth paper investigates a tool for helping consumers begin anew and move beyond failure and disappointment. Ainslie Schultz, Linda Price, and Robin Coulter extend their prior research on "Fresh Starts" to demonstrate across several experiments that a "Fresh Start" can be an important adaptive strategy for taking up new goals following failure and re-energizing and renewing engagement with a current goal.

Together, these papers provide a broadened perspective on how consumers interpret and move beyond difficulties, disappointments, and failures to persevere, try again, do different and do better, to improve their wellbeing. Consistent with the conference theme of advancing connections, the papers interplay to create a lively conversation across methodologies and disciplinary boundaries about the everyday utility of these tools for enhancing consumer wellbeing. The topic is likely to have broad appeal and serve as a rich petri dish for future investigations.

From Difficulty to Possibility: Interpretation of Experienced Difficulty, Motivation and Behavior

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People sometimes dig in and other times disengage after experiencing difficulty. To understand why that might be, we use identity-based motivation theory to articulate two different interpretations of what experienced difficulty might mean for engagement in difficult tasks. Prior research has documented that what ease or difficulty implies depends on the situation at hand. We propose that in the situation of school or work, accomplishing tasks with ease can interpreted as meaning that the tasks are possible with the implication that experienced difficulty is a signal that the tasks may be impossible. However, in the same situations, ease could also be a signal that a task is mundane or trivial, with the implication that experienced difficulty implies that the task is important.

Four experiments test and support our predictions. People led to consider experienced difficulty as implying impossibility were less task focused than those led to consider experienced difficulty as implying importance. When asked to describe their possible selves and strategies, they were less focused on school and academics and instead included a variety of other possibilities and social roles (Study 1). When asked to what extent they would sacrifice to attain their goals, they were less likely to agree that they would (Study 2). Lack of focus translated into worse performance (Study 3 intelligence test, Study 4 standardized writing test). In the first four studies the method used, random assignment to reading either four statements inducing one to consider whether difficulty implies impossible or importance, implies that both interpretations of experienced difficulty are likely represented in memory. Both have everyday utility, facilitating engagement and task switching, by focusing on whether a task is important (as opposed to trivial) or impossible (as opposed to possible). Moreover, much as has been found in stereotype threat research, inducing people to consider the interpretation yielded an effect, it was not necessary that people endorsed the proffered interpretation – endorsement did not moderate the effect of the prime. The initial studies documented that the interpretation of experienced difficulty that was on one's mind mattered.

In follow-up studies, we assessed the two interpretations of experienced difficulty. This allowed us to examine the extent to which the two interpretations of experienced difficulty were correlated with

each other or with other popular measures of persistence and engagement, in particular, self-reported persistence or 'grit' and the belief that ability is fixed and not changeable with effort. Across studies correlations varied but were consistently small, implying that each of these constructs captures unique aspects of the motivation and engagement process. One can persist because one is a "persister", because one believes that skills are malleable and not fixed, or because difficulty itself cues engagement – implying that the task is important and not impossible. In two final studies we tested this possibility by looking at the relationship between interpretation of experienced difficulty, belief in malleability of skills, and value-expectancy (self-efficacy and self-competence) measures. Here too we find that each of the interpretation difficulty and malleability constructs have independent effects on the value and expectancy constructs.

Across studies the implication is that one of the ways to keep going, stay focused, and succeed when experiencing difficulty is to interpret the experienced difficulty as implying task importance. Interpreting experienced difficulty as task impossibility has an undermining effect and our correlational studies imply that this is independent of the positive consequences of interpreting experienced difficulty as task important. Thus the best possible strategy may be to interpret experienced difficulty as both implying that a task is important and not impossible.

What happens once a task has been interpreted as impossible, at least for the moment? Is it possible to forgive oneself or be given a 'fresh start' so that one can re-engage and once more reap the benefits of interpreting difficulty as importance? Our studies did not tackle this important question, but the next set of papers do just that.

Rising Every Time They Fall: The Importance and Determinants of Consumer Resilience

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Nelson Mandela famously pointed out that, "the greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." Indeed, academic research has shown that this ability to rebound from failure, also known as resilience, is critical in individual well-being (Scoloveno, 2014; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004) and can lead to an enhanced sense of life purpose (Rutten et al., 2013). Much resilience research considers the construct in either pathological settings or in the context of extraordinary events where resilience leads to acts of true heroism (see Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013 for review).

We suggest that the next wave of resilience research will consider the ways that resilience is manifest in everyday experiences. Specifically, we propose that *consumer resilience* is a key factor in successful consumption experiences.

We began our study of this topic with an experiment designed to see if trait resilience might have important impacts on marketplace outcomes. This study was conducted using an online panel (n = 185, M_{age} = 32.63 years, 63% male) who took part in the study in return for a nominal payment. Participants read about two service experiences that involved potential dissatisfaction: one that involved relatively low stakes (a bad haircut) and one that involved much higher stakes (the failure to find an effective medical response to a health problem).

Respondents then used a 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (very likely) scale to report their propensity to respond to this situation in a number of ways, including a way that would signal persistence (asking the stylist to keep working on the haircut with them), the use of coping strategies (making a joke), negative feelings or emotional labor (feeling angry, hiding the feeling). Participants also reported their likelihood of returning to the same service provider (1 = not at all

likely, 7 = very likely), and their likelihood of recommending this service provider to a friend. They then completed a filler task that took approximately 3 minutes, consisting of rating a number of pictures, and then completed the other scenario.

After an additional filler task, participants completed the resilience scale (Campbell-Sills and Stein, 2007), a 10-item measure that includes items such as "I am able to adapt to change" and "I tend to bounce back after illness and hardship," with responses anchored at "Not at all true of me" (1) and "True of me nearly all of the time," (5).

We observe a range of trait resilience (M = 3.74, range 1.3 to 5). Using this index to predict participants' likelihood to engage in various responses to the frustrating service experience, we find similar patterns regardless of context. In both low and high-stakes situations, more resilient individuals were significantly more likely to keep working with a service provider to identify a solution or to return to the same service provider, less likely to feel anger or to hide their feelings, and either marginally (low stakes) or significantly (high stakes) more likely to recommend the service provider to others.

Given these findings, we next designed a study to capture the habitual thoughts and behaviors of individuals with a range of trait resilience. A sample of 594 US consumers (M_{age} = 34.2 years, 51.6% female) provided both qualitative descriptions of their own resilient and non-resilient behavior and quantitative response to the same Trait Resilience measure used in study 1. They also provided responses related to their experience of life stressors (Holmes and Rahe, 1967), subjective well-being, susceptibility to sunk cost effects, and their use of structure and schedules (make lists and plan) and approaches to goals.

In both qualitative and index measures, we again observed a range in resilience; qualitative responses will be discussed at the conference. The trait measure demonstrated that more resilient consumers tend to experience similar levels of life stress as less resilient consumers. However, regression analyses also showed that more resilient people tended to use structure and plans in their lives more than did less resilient people. Rather than seeing such plans as means of restricting freedom, resilient individuals seemed to use plans as guides for maintaining progress. Further, we find that resilient people do not hold systematically different goals than do other consumers; they simply have a higher degree of optimism that can fulfil them. This finding suggests that firms need not expect resilience only among certain goals segments, but rather, that resilience can be of benefit in a wide range of domains. Interestingly, we also see a greater susceptibility to sunk cost effects among resilient consumers, suggesting that there may be some situations in which consumers' tendency to persist can become suboptimal – a finding that has not been suggested in prior resilience research.

A third experiment, to be completed by ACR, will build on our finding that planning is a means of fostering resilient behavior. In this experiment, we provide some participants with planning prompts and structure (i.e., "you can make a plan to support the United Way – do a task a day!"), others with salience cues (i.e., don't forget the United Way!") and some with freedom cues ("support the United Way any way you want, anytime you want.") To make this donation, participants need to complete a number of tasks over the course of a week, some of which present substantial challenge. We anticipate that resilient participants will be more likely to complete the donation process than less resilient participants. We also anticipate that planning prompts will be more effective than salience or freedom prompts in helping chronically non-resilient participants to complete the donation process, as planning can help promote resilience.

In sum, we argue that *consumer resilience* is a critical yet unrecognized element in successful consumer experience. Given the importance of resilience in a wide range of domains, we believe this work will inspire researchers to focus on its operation in the consumer realm, while also prompting marketers and policymakers to target its development in the individuals they serve.

Many Goals – One Choice: Understanding Consumer Forgiveness

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Within the sociocultural structures of the marketplace, consumers can be wronged by individuals, groups, institutions, or other forces. In response, consumers engage in coping behaviors (Duhachek, 2005), complain (Dunn and Dahl, 2012), badmouth transgressors (Zhang, Feick, and Mittal, 2014), seek revenge (Bechwati and Morrin, 2003), switch providers (Ganesh, Arnold and Reynolds, 2000) or choose a more positive outcome, such as reconciling with the transgressor (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, and Tripp, 2013). Previous research also suggests some consumers may choose to forgive transgressors (Grégoire and Fisher, 2006; Zourrig, Chebat and Toffoli, 2009). However, noticeably absent is a focused exploration of why and how consumers choose to forgive marketplace transgressions.

Our paper explores consumer forgiveness as a socially grounded choice to marketplace transgression and makes several important contributions. First, we illuminate consumers' forgiveness experiences in light of service transgressions as goal-directed, socioculturally-grounded gestalts, and demonstrate how this gestalt approach informs and enhances the psychological perspective that dominates extant consumer literature on the topic. Second, our research demonstrates that consumers not only pursue their general well-being but multiple goals in choosing to forgive transgressions. Third, we highlight the salience of marketplace influences in shaping consumers' forgiveness choices. Finally, we explain why some transgressions that might be perceived as relatively mild may lead consumers to terminate relationships with service providers, and equally paradoxically, why some choose to maintain relationships after transgressions that might be perceived as very severe.

Marketplace transgressions are of interest to researchers due to their profound effects on consumers and subsequent implications for marketers. Broadly, such transgressions result in either anti-firm (negative word-of-mouth, third-party complaining, exit, and revenge) or pro-firm (positive word-of-mouth, patronage, and reconciliation) outcomes, complaining to management, and general consumer coping with the elicited distress. Consumer research that explores the various outcomes of marketplace transgressions suggest that emotions, appraisals of the transgressor, reparation and recompense, transgression severity, consumer/provider relationships, personality traits, demographics, social influences and industry structure (manifest through availability of alternatives and switching costs) impact consumer responses to transgressions.

Consumer forgiveness as a possible response to marketplace transgressions receives far less attention. In studies on consumer revenge, authors either speculate that forgiveness may explain instances of low or attenuated effects of revenge (Bechwati and Morrin, 2007; Joireman et al., 2013), or advise firms to explore responses promoting forgiveness as a means of avoiding consumer revenge (Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011). In addition, Grégoire and Fisher (2008) find that high-quality relationships with providers do not guarantee forgiveness, but may instead backfire. A few other studies within consumer behavior discuss the mediating role of forgiveness (Fournier, 1998; Tsarenko and Tojib, 2012; Xie and

Peng, 2009). Two qualitative studies explore forgiveness as one of outcomes of consumer responses to conflicts. Ringberg et al. (2007) show that relational consumers (i.e., those focusing on emotional ties with providers) tend to exhibit forgiveness, whereas oppositional consumers (i.e., those who hold oppositional views on the provider) are least likely to forgive. Further, Beverland et al. (2010) discuss forgiveness as dichotomous outcome of conflict resolution (i.e., one either forgives or holds grudges).

To explore consumer forgiveness, we conducted phenomenological, semi-structured interviews with 35 people who had experienced marketplace transgressions with service providers within the two years prior to interviews in the healthcare and financial sectors. Transgressions ranged in severity from minor problems to life-threatening crises. Nevertheless, informants regarded even the less traumatic incidents as impacting their lives. Although informants often discussed their transgression experiences holistically, they attributed the offenses to either service providers at large, or to specific individuals. To present our findings, we rely on the case method approach.

Our interview analyses resulted in four gestalts of forgiveness as a choice which are differentiated by the underlying ruminative strategy. Forgiveness as grace (Victor) is defined by empathetic ruminations shaped by key cultural and social dimensions. As a professional service provider, an athlete and a loving husband/father, Victor's choice to forgive allows him to achieve consistency and harmony in his life, ensure his family's well-being, and act as a role model. Forgiveness as analgesic (Janine) is driven by self-healing ruminations. Her choice to forgive is bounded by the transgression severity and her relationship insecurity that stems from her dependence on future medical care and a limited number of skilled professionals. Janine chooses to forgive to achieve the goals of regaining her most basic life functions (similar to other consumers facing dire choices; Pavia and Mason, 2004) and of adapting to future uncertainty given her disability. A relational goal—being a role model to her family—also motivates her choice. Forgiveness as fate (Frank) is driven by cynical ruminations regarding the industry structure. Frank's identities both as a young yet knowledgeable employee and a devout Christian guide his choice to forgive. Bound by industry constraints, Frank chooses to forgive to follow Christian values—but awareness about a lack of better marketplace alternatives also guide his choice. Finally, forgiveness as atonement (Tracey) is driven by justice ruminations. Tracey's identities as a career woman, a respected networker and a recent immigrant guide her choice to forgive. Tracey chooses to forgive to achieve her personal goals of restoring self-respect and serenity, as well as a relational goal of achieving justice.

We offer a more holistic understanding on forgiveness than a purely psychological perspective allows. In contrast to social-psychological research that focuses on the health benefits of forgiveness or the desire to maintain relationships with transgressors, our research demonstrates that consumers consider a variety of personal and relational goals in making their choice. Interestingly, and in contrast to incidences of interpersonal forgiveness, consumers' choices to forgive are not necessarily associated with their desire to preserve transgressor relationships. When no solution exists to resolve the transgression, the choice to forgive may be the only option for consumers, to restore their basic life functioning. Because these marketplace mistakes are too risky to be repeated, reconciliation is frequently not associated with forgiveness. We further show how some aspects of culture, religion, family and friends play an important role in consumer-forgiveness cases.

Can A "Fresh Start"
Help Consumers Achieve Their Goals?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Belief in the power of "Fresh Starts" to help people move past failures, engage with and achieve lapsed or new goals has a long history in folklore and religious rituals. "Fresh Starts" also have a prominent role in popular culture featured in movies, blogs, ad campaigns and products. Everyday consumers pursue new beginnings related to diet, exercise, financial wellbeing and personal growth. We know that conceptual metaphors such as "Fresh Start" can often be powerful tools for reframing problems and motivating behaviors (Coulter and Zaltman, 1995; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Landau, Keefer and Meier, 2010; Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011). However, research has not examined whether "Fresh Starts" can indeed help consumers achieve their goals. In prior research, we define a "fresh start" as consumers' pursuit of new beginnings, and develop a reliable, valid measure distinct from related constructs such as optimism, hope, entity theory and psychological closure (Schultz, Price, and Coulter, 2014; 2015). We find consumers pursuing new beginnings focus on the future optimistically, construe the future abstractly, have intentions to improve and change behaviors in health, finances, organizing and disposition, and are likely to make novel choices.

This research investigates whether and how "fresh starts" affect goal achievement. Fresh starts may incite action toward goals by shifting focus from the past to the future, widening the gap between a past and future self and building confidence in the ability to reach goals—enabling the new self to act different (Libby and Eibach, 2002). Related research finds that people who feel they are making embodied progress forward are more inclined to reach their goals (Natanzon and Ferguson, 2012) and that people who experience positive affect during a goal increase their odds of achieving that goal (Carver and Scheier, 1990). Across four studies, we show that a "fresh start" helps consumers move past goal failure to succeed at goals similar or different from an initial failed goal, and boosts performance between contingent tasks.

Study 1 asks whether a "Fresh Start" affects goal-directed behavior following failure on a similar independent task. We used a 2 (fresh start, control) x 2 (self-affirmation, no self-affirmation; as self-affirmation is a commonly used strategy to improve goal pursuit following failure) between subjects design (n=136). Undergraduate students first engaged in a five-minute RAT task (Griskevicius et al., 2006; Mednick, 1962), and upon completion received (false) feedback saying they performed worse than average. Then half the participants were affirmed by writing about their top-ranked value and half not affirmed by writing about their 7th ranked value (Steele, 1988). Before completing task 2, in the fresh start condition participants read, "Start anew" and clicked to the next page; those in the control condition simply clicked to the next page. Participants again completed a five-minute RAT, and the number of correct items served as our dependent variable. The analysis revealed the predicted main effect of the fresh start condition, $F (1, 136) = 5.32$, p = .02, with those participants in the fresh start condition significantly outperforming others on the second RAT ($M_{fresh} = 3.49$, vs. $M_{no\ fresh} = 2.68$), suggesting that a "fresh start" helps participants move past failure. We note no significant difference in performance between the self-affirmed and control group $F (1, 136) = .23$, $p = .63$.

Study 2 extends study 1. In particular, we ask whether following failure if consumers who make a fresh start are better able than controls to succeed at a task in a separate, unrelated domain. Study 2 also provides mediational evidence for the role of positive affect in fresh starts. Undergraduates (n=114) took a five-minute math in-

telligence test (difficult GMAT problems). Upon completion, participants received false feedback, saying they performed worse than average. Participants then solved as many of 8 Remote Associations (RAT), as possible within six minutes with the number answered correctly serving as our dependent variable. Next, participants answered the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, 1988). As expected, participants with stronger (vs. weaker) fresh start feelings performed significantly better on the RAT task following failure at an unrelated task, $b = -7.86$, $t (1, 114) = -1.88$, $p = .06$. Hayes bootstrapped confidence intervals for mediation analysis revealed that, controlling for positive affect (mediator), a fresh start was no longer a significant predictor of performance, $\beta = .16$ [.04 to .36] as the confidence interval did not contain 0, providing support for the fully mediating role of positive affect.

Study 3 examines whether Fresh Starts are useful when tasks are contingent. In this experiment, we tested to see whether a fresh start could boost performance following failure on a first task where one's overall performance is based on both tasks. Sixty-six (29 men) undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to the fresh start condition or control condition and provided 8 RAT questions to answer in 4 minutes. Participants graded their own answers. The answer key contained a false standardized curve such that all participants fell in the bottom quartile. In the fresh start condition participants read, "Start anew" and clicked to the next page; control condition participants simply clicked to the next page. Next participants decorated pumpkin-shaped cookies with the goal of creating a creative cookie. Once finished, participants rated each other's cookies on a scale from 1 ("Very uncreative") to 7 ("Very creative") and answered general questions about the study, including, "I am good at decorating cookies." An ANCOVA with fresh start as the between-subjects factor and "I am good at decorating cookies" as a covariate revealed a one-tailed significant main effect of the fresh start condition on participants peer assessments of creativity, ($F (1, 60) = 3.17$, $p = .04$). Simple effects tests showed that overall participants considered cookies decorated by participants in the fresh start condition ($M_{fresh} = 4.53$) as more creative than cookies decorated by participants in the control condition ($M_{control} = 4.27$).

Lastly, a field study demonstrates a "fresh start" improves performance across contingent tasks toward an overall goal. Thirty undergraduates participated. Exam 1 occurred after the first month of class, with the intervention a week before exam 2. In the fresh start intervention participants were motivated to move forward and approach exam 2 as a fresh, new exam, while in the control condition, participants were encouraged to learn from exam 1 and apply those lessons to exam 2. As expected, participants in the fresh start intervention performed significantly better on the second exam than participants in the control intervention ($M_{fresh} = 107.067$, $M_{control} = 102.433$; $F (1, 30) = 5.97$, $p = 0.02$; out of 120 possible exam points).

Across four studies, we show that making a fresh start not only aids consumers in pursuing new goals, but also helps them move past goal failure to succeed on similar or different independent goals and on contingent tasks and goal progression.

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