All For One and One For All: Individual Vicarious Goal Fulfillment in Group Contexts

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We explore the impact of group identification on individual goal pursuit. We show that when a group has made progress towards an overall group goal, individuals with high group identification will decrease their individual goal pursuit efforts. Evidence suggests that vicarious goal fulfillment mediates this effect.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Support groups are a popular means to assist in goal achievement because they provide a structure that is designed to help individuals achieve personal goals through the alignment of similar goals. It is estimated that in the US alone there are over 500,000 support groups (Fetto 2000; Katz 1993). Given the immense size of the industry and their prevalence in consumers’ lives, it is important to understand how support groups impact individual goal pursuit.

In support groups, members often share similar goals and expect that the support group will function as a means of goal facilitation, resulting in a high degree of identification with the group (Tajfel et al. 1979). The strength of this identification enables individuals to personally experience the successes or failures of the group (Ashforth and Mael 1989), which could lead to vicarious goal progress, and thereby license the individual to decrease individual goal pursuit.

We also hypothesize that the relationship between group identification and vicarious goal fulfillment will be moderated by a member’s self-construal (Singelis 1994). We posit that high identification can increase the perceived overlap between a support group and an individual to a greater degree for individuals who are interdependent because these individuals already see themselves as highly connected to others. Therefore, when an interdependent (vs. independent) member highly identifies with their group, they will experience vicarious goal progress to a greater degree.

Study 1 (N = 140 students)

Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (group identification: high vs. low) x 2 (individual goal salient: yes vs. no). If individual goals are made salient, individuals may re-focus on the self and be less likely to assimilate the group’s progress as their own, thereby attenuating the impact of identification on individual goal pursuit.

In the high (low) group identification condition, participants were told the other group members were similar (dissimilar) to them. Participants then read instructions indicating they had to come up with as many unusual uses for two common objects as possible and asked to indicate a personal goal of 8, 12, or 16 uses identified and informed of their group’s goal.

After the initial problem set, participants received false feedback regarding their individual and group’s progress, and were presented with an opportunity to identify uses for 2 new objects. Participants in the goal salient condition were told they had this opportunity because they did not meet their individual goal, while participants in the non-salient condition proceeded directly to the second word set.

The main dependent variable was time spent on the second set of words minus time spent on the first. If individuals are less motivated due to vicarious goal fulfillment, they should spend less time on the second set than the first.

Results:

An ANOVA yielded a significant interaction of identification and goal salience (F(1, 136) = 4.28, p < .05). Further analysis revealed that in the high identification condition, participants spent significantly less time on the second set of problems when the goal was not salient (Mnonidentical = -77.06) compared to when the goal was salient (M identical = -33.41; F(1, 69) = 6.90, p < .05). When identification was low, no differences emerged (p > .10).

Study 2 (N = 159 MTurk respondents)

Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (group identification: low vs. high) x 2 (group progress: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Individual goal pursuit efforts should only decrease when the group has made a high level of progress towards its goal because the individual will assimilate this high progress to their own progress, thus resulting in a decrease in individual goal efforts.

The design was similar to that which was used in study 1, but the task for this study was derived from the Remote Associates Test (Mednick 1962). Participants were presented with word sets containing three words, after which they attempted to identify a fourth related word. After the initial problem set, participants received false feedback. Individual feedback was kept consistent, but, depending on group progress condition, participants were informed that their group’s progress was either 32% or 82%. Participants were then presented with an opportunity to answer additional problems.

Results

An ANOVA yielded a significant interaction of identification and group progress (F(1, 158) = 3.88, p = .05). Further analysis revealed that in the high identification condition, participants spent significantly less time on the second problem set than the first when they perceived their group’s combined progress as high (M = -151.65) compared to when they perceived their group’s progress as low (M = -20.61); F(1, 73) = 5.96, p < .05. In the low identification condition, no differences emerged (p > .10).

Study 3 (N = 136 students)

The study consisted of 1 manipulated factor (group identification: low vs. high) and 1 measured factor (self-construal). The identification manipulation and study design was similar to study one, except that after the first set of objects, and before the second, participants were asked their perceived goal progress (1 = none at all, 7 = a lot) in order to assess vicarious goal fulfillment. Lastly, participants filled out the self-construal scale (Singelis 1994).

Results

An ANOVA yielded a significant interaction of identification and self-construal (F(1, 132) = 4.04, p < .05). Further analysis revealed that in the high identification condition, interdependent participants spent significantly less time on the second problem set than the first, (Midentendent = -61.07) compared to independent participants (Mindependent = -29.53); F(1, 60) = 4.87, p < .05. When identification was low, no differences emerged (p > .10).

We used PROCESS model 8 (Hayes 2013) to examine the mediating effects of vicarious goal fulfillment. The strength of group identification X self-construal interaction had a significant effect on vicarious goal fulfillment (SE = 3.65, CI [-28.54, -14.08]) and vicarious goal fulfillment influenced continued individual goal pursuit (SE = .39, CI [1.0 2.55]). This finding supports our hypothesized process by which disengagement from continued individual goal pursuit arises by means of vicarious goal fulfillment.