When Goal Conflict Increases Motivation

Anastasiya Pocheptsova, University of Maryland, USA
Jordan Etkin, University of Maryland, USA
Uzma Khan, Stanford University, USA

Consumers 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 can lead to higher motivation by increasing perceived goal importance.

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Jordan Etkin, University of Maryland, USA
Uzma Khan, Stanford University, USA*
Anastasiya Pocheptsova, University of Maryland, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Everyday consumers decide how to pursue their multiple goals. The decision becomes difficult when these goals conflict with each other (Fishbach and Ferguson 2007; Kruglanski et al. 2002). For instance, a consumer may want to loose weight and enjoy tasty foods, or save money and travel the world, or may wish to get a promotion at work and spend time with family. Reconciling the pursuit of conflicting goals is psychologically aversive and induces decision-difficulty. Prior literature has noted that goal conflict decreases motivation and the likelihood that individuals will strive to achieve the conflicting goals (McKeeman and Karoly 1991).

Contrary to past research, we propose that goal conflict can have positive impact on motivation. Our proposition is based on the finding that subjective experiences of difficulty can serve as an input into judgment (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 and instrumental to goal attainment (Pocheptsova et al. 2010; 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. Specifically, we posit that people would expect to experience more conflict when goals are more (versus less) important. 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, which in-turn is a key driver of motivation (Kruglanski et al. 2002). Hence, to the extent the subjective difficulty associated with goal conflict increases perceived goal importance, we predict that goal conflict will increase, rather than decrease, motivation. Multiple studies provide support for our proposition.

Study 1 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 either in three weeks after the trip (low-conflict condition) or immediately after the trip (high-conflict condition). Among several unrelated measures, participants rated importance of “academic success” and “spending time with friends”. As 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).

Study 2 tested 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 conflicted with each other (high-conflict condition); the remaining were not asked for any examples (low-conflict condition). After filler tasks, we measured how conflicted participants felt and their motivation to pursue the two goals that were in conflict as well as some other goals that did not conflict with the two focal goals. As predicted, participants in high-conflict condition were more motivated to pursue the two conflicting goals (F(1, 25) = 5.98, p<.05). However, no increase in motivation was observed for goals that were not in conflict (p > .25), suggesting that increase in motivation arises from feelings of conflict and is not due to general arousal or mood differences, which should also affect goals that are not in conflict.

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 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 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 measures assessing motivation to pursue the conflicting goals and perceptions of goal importance. As predicted, 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). Moreover, goal conflict increased perceptions of goal importance (F(1, 67) = 5.56, p <.05) and motivation (F(1, 68) = 4.16, p <.05) and the positive effect of goal conflict on motivation was mediated by perceived importance of the goals.

Two additional experiments explored when conflict helps and when it hurts motivation. In one study we find that goal conflict increases motivation when goals compete for resources but not when they compete directly. In a 2(conflicting goal present vs. not) X 2(conflict type: direct vs. resource) study we described an academic goal (passing an exam) and a social goal (attending a friend’s party) as competing for resources (making progress towards the two goals consumes the same resource of time/energy/money/etc.) or as competing directly (making progress towards one detracts from the other). Motivation towards the academic goal served as DV. Participants indicated they would spend more hours studying when a social goal was present than when it was absent. However, the positive effect of conflict occurred when the goals competed for resources and reversed when they competed directly.

Another study uncovered that level of conflict also influences whether goal conflict helps or hurts motivation. Going from one goal (social) to two goals (social and Health) increased motivation to pursue both goals (higher willingness to pay for goal-related activities). However, going from two to three goal (social, health, and professional) directionally decreased motivation.

Our findings are the first to demonstrate that inter-goal conflict can increase motivation. The research suggests a more comprehensive view of how the relationship among goals affects goal-directed behavior. Given the growing complexity of consumers’ wants and needs, understanding antecedents and consequences of negotiating goal conflict remains an important direction for future research.

REFERENCES:


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