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The Benefits of Behaving Badly: Successful Regulation By Planned Deviation

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This research tests the idea that plans that require extended inhibition of desires, may benefit from including planned goal deviations. Two experiments demonstrate that including planned goal-deviation moments during goal striving enhances self-regulatory resources, boosts consumers' motivation and affect experienced, which all contribute to long-term goal attainment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Is it smart to have a chocolate cake when you are on a diet to lose weight? Is it a good idea to spend money on something feeble today when you are trying hard to save money for a larger purchase next month? Most people would answer these questions negatively, thinking they should always try to control the desires that conflict with an important current goal (Dholakia et al. 2006). Indeed, there seems to be a general belief that activities that deviate from the focal goal should be avoided since they are detrimental to goal attainment (Fishbach and Shah 2006). In contrast to this general belief, we propose that including *planned* goal-deviation activities may actually be beneficial for long term goal attainment, such as by having a chocolate cake every now and then when on a diet. These goal deviations can enhance consumers' motivation to persist in goal-striving, help replenish consumers' self-regulatory ability- fundamental to persist with successful inhibitions, improve emotional state and ultimately reduce the likelihood of final goal failure. Support for this idea would show when "it is good in the long run to behave badly on occasion in the short run".

Predictions and Set-Up of the Studies

Obviously, a plan that comprises only goal interruptions is a bad plan. Yet, planning for short moments of "being bad" in the context of a larger sequence of "being good" we believe is advantageous. More formally, we propose that "intermittent goal-striving," that is, goal-striving that takes place in larger blocks, interspersed by the possibility of engagement in small planned goal-deviation activities, enhances the likelihood of final goal attainment, through a combination of multiple helpful means: replenish of self-regulatory resources, which contribute positively to other factors that aide goal attainment, such as the motivation to proceed towards the goal, the experience of positive emotions, and the ability to develop coping strategies. The following set of hypotheses is tested:

Hypothesis 1: As compared to having unplanned goal deviations and straight goal pursuit, including planned goal deviations in a plan increases consumers' self-regulatory resources to proceed with set of regulatory tasks and thus the likelihood of goal attainment.

Hypothesis 2: Including planned goal deviations in the goal-striving plans, as compared with straight goal pursuit, increases consumers' motivation to proceed with goal-pursuit, with consumers' experiencing a boost in emotional state experienced.

Hypothesis 3: Including planned goal deviations in the goal-striving plans, as compared with straight goal pursuit, improves consumers overall subjective well-being (measured as boost in positive affect), positively influencing consumers' ability to generate coping strategies to deal with unexpected or stressful events.

Studies

Experiment 1 and 2 focused on a weight loss goal. We chose this because "eating is one of the most commonplace, yet least well understood, self-regulation domains" (Vohs and Baumeister 2004, p. 7), and because dieters tend to interrupt their weight loss goals many times (Heatherton and Baumeister 1991). Experiment 1 used a role-playing task where participants simulated a dieting experience by making food choices for seven consecutive days. In experiment 2, we searched for extra support of findings of experiment 1, but this time participants actually followed different diet-plans. For two weeks, we assessed daily measures of the main variables. One month later participants' evaluation of the different goal-striving plans was also assessed.

Main Results

The findings from experiment 1 (59 paid students, two-group design: intermittent-striving vs straight-striving) supported our hypotheses, with participants in the intermittent-striving condition showing higher expected self-regulatory ability, than participants in the straight-striving condition ($M_{\text{intermittent}} = 4.25$, $M_{\text{straight}} = 3.73$, $F(1, 57) = 4.35$, $p < .05$), indicating that goal-deviation moments were perceived as facilitators to proceed with self-regulation. Moreover, in line with our H3, participants in the intermittent goal-striving condition generated more different coping strategies to overcome temptations than participants in the straight-striving condition ($M_{\text{intermittent}} = 6.43$, $M_{\text{straight}} = 5.10$, $F(1, 57) = 6.40$, $p < .05$).

Consistent with our findings from experiment 1, results from experiment 2 (23 participants, two-group design: intermittent-striving vs straight-striving, conducted over one month and a half) indicated that participants in the *intermittent striving* condition significantly increased their self-regulatory ability before and after the diet period (MWeek0 = 1.98, MWeek2 = 2.38, $t(11) = -2.66$, $p < .05$), as opposed to participants in the *straight striving* condition (MWeek0 = 2.20, MWeek2 = 2.28, $t(10) = .77$, *n.s.*). Regarding affect measures, results support our H2. When repeated measures analysis were conducted separately for positive and negative emotions, results indicated a marginally significant interaction effect of time and condition for positive emotions for the whole dieting period ($F(13,273) = 1.734$, $p = .054$) mainly due to an increase in the emotions experienced from week 1 to week 2 from participants in the *intermittent striving* condition ($M_{\text{week 1}} = 5.54$, $M_{\text{week 2}} = 5.93$, $t(11) = -1.98$, $p = .073$).

General Discussion

We proposed and found strong support across two experiments that when goal-deviation behaviors are planned, that is, are part of the long-term plan, they actually may help rather than hurt successful goal pursuit. This reveals the importance of flexibility in goal pursuit, and that it can be good in the long-run to behave badly in the short-run, when this is part of the plan.

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438 / The Benefits of Behaving Badly: Successful Regulation by Planned Deviation

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