

Goals as Excuses or Guides: The Liberating Effect of Perceived Goal Progress on Choice

AYELET FISHBACH
RAVI DHAR*

Consumer choices are often driven by multiple goals (e.g., career and family), each of which if viewed in isolation may appear to suggest conflicting choices. This article examines the effect of initial goal pursuit on consumers' interest in pursuing unrelated or even conflicting goals. Four studies were conducted to test whether perceived goal progress hinders the pursuit of the focal goal. These studies demonstrate that in the course of self-regulation progress along one goal liberates people to pursue inconsistent goals. Furthermore, merely planning to make goal progress in the future may facilitate incongruent choice of immediate action.

People's choices are usually driven by multiple underlying goals, each of which if viewed in isolation may appear conflicting. For example, individuals simultaneously believe in saving for retirement as well as taking luxurious vacations, doing well academically and socializing actively with friends, and so forth. Previous research has often portrayed the self-regulation processes as involving setting abstract goals that then motivate consistent choice of actions (Gollwitzer 1999; Higgins 1997; Locke and Latham 1990). The empirical work supporting this basic premise has focused mainly on situations where the individual has set a single goal. If individuals simultaneously hold multiple goals, an account of consumer behavior needs to address the manner in which consumers pursue sequential choices among these potentially conflicting goals.

This article examines subsequent consumer choice following initial goal pursuit. We propose that when individuals hold multiple goals, the pursuit or the intention to pursue the initial goal (hereafter referred to as the focal goal) may liberate the individual to subsequently pursue unrelated or even conflicting goals (e.g., succumbing to temptation). For instance, the opening of a new savings account may suggest to the individuals that one's goal of saving for the future is being actively pursued, and, as a result, new savers might become more willing to spend money on indulgences. Specifically, this article explores the hypothesis that actions that are used to infer goal progress act to liberate the individual and thereby increase the likelihood of pursuing incongruent actions, whereas the same actions interpreted in terms of

goal commitment elicit a tendency to subsequently maintain the pursuit of the focal goal.

Goals as Excuses or Guides: Goal Progress versus Goal Commitment

Goals are seen as cognitive structures that can be represented in terms of movement and progress toward some abstract and desirable end state or in terms of commitment to a fixed and desirable end state. Goal commitment is defined as an inference concerning the strength of a goal, whereas goal progress refers to the pursuit of a previously defined goal. A major area of goal research has focused on identifying different factors that affect goal commitment (Atkinson and Raynor 1978; Feather 1990; Gollwitzer 1999; Locke and Latham 1990) more than perceptions of goal progress (Carver and Scheier 1998; Soman and Shi 2003). Generally speaking, goal commitment is viewed as a continuous variable, and an action toward a certain goal is seen as increasing the commitment to actions that favor the same goal. Although this is a widely accepted finding in the goal literature, the empirical evidence is limited to studies where a single goal is salient, that is, performance on task is measured for a single goal.

In most real-life situations, people hold several different goals that they intend to pursue. Furthermore, environmental cues, social opportunities, and personal factors can also activate these different and potentially inconsistent motivations (Kruglanski et al. 2002). For instance, people may want to enjoy culinary delights while also wanting a slim figure, or they may wish to purchase gadgets and save money for the future. As these examples demonstrate, multiple goals do not need to be equally central to an individual's identity and may create a self-control dilemma whenever the accomplishment of some higher priority goals conflicts with

*Ayelet Fishbach is assistant professor at the Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago, 5807 South Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637 (ayelet.fishbach@ChicagoGSB.edu). Ravi Dhar is professor at the School of Management, Yale University, 135 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511 (ravi.dhar@yale.edu). Correspondence: Ayelet Fishbach.

other lower-order goals. Following recent research, goals are broadly defined to include long-term objectives as well as salient short-term temptations (e.g., Trope and Fishbach 2000).

The regulation of multiple goals requires the individual to consider both the progress in moving toward the goal as well as the strength of commitment to the goal. We propose that when individuals hold multiple goals, an action toward a goal can result in a greater focus on goal progress or on commitment. Furthermore, this difference in relative focus on goal progress versus goal commitment will potentially have opposite implications for regulating behavior through subsequent actions. Specifically, if an initial action is used to infer one's general level of commitment to a goal, it is likely to be followed by a similar choice of actions (e.g., Bem 1972; Soman and Cheema 2004). Our main hypothesis is to show that if this very same initial action is used to infer one's general level of goal progress (i.e., movement toward a goal), it should be followed by choice of actions that pursue other, even inconsistent, goals or temptations.

Balancing between Multiple Activated Goals

People often cope with multiple activated goals by either maintaining the pursuit of a single goal or alternating between different and potentially contradictory goals (Dhar and Simonson 1999; Kivetz and Simonson 2002). When maintaining a single goal, individuals would be most likely to maintain its pursuit by choosing subsequent actions that are consistent (Bargh et al. 2001). However, when individuals have multiple goals, they can choose to pursue each in sequence by focusing on course of actions until the focal goal is met or simultaneously by choosing different actions, some of which may be incongruent with the focal goal. Previous research in several different domains suggests that people demonstrate some degree of balancing among different conflicting motivational tendencies in multiple choices when the presence of multiple goals is implied and variety seeking becomes a dominant motivation in consumer choice (Ariely and Levav 2000; Drolet 2002; Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999; Read and Loewenstein 1995). However, the presence of multiple goals is only a precondition for actions that alternate between contradictory goals.

More important, we propose that self-regulation through balancing requires that a person focus on goal progress. In such cases, pursuing an activity suggests to the person that progress has been made and the pursuit of the focal goal is relatively satisfactory. As a result, individuals should be more likely to switch to pursuit of alternative goals, especially when the progress is fast. This also follows from the finding that when people have multiple goals, the choice of actions that neglect the pursuit of one goal at the expense of another is likely to be more aversive than when only a single goal is salient (Dhar and Simonson 1999). Thus, the switch to actions in the pursuit of another goal is easier when the person can point to a sense of progress or accomplishment on the focal goal. However, this switch is made harder when the same actions are used to infer goal com-

mitment rather than progress. When people view the pursuit of a focal goal as a defining characteristic of their self-concept, pursuing it cannot possibly justify withdrawing its pursuit.

Borrowing from Future Progress and Consuming Past Progress. The aforementioned analysis further suggests that focusing on goal progress can justify a choice of inconsistent actions even before engaging in actions to pursue the focal goal. In other words, the order of the initial and subsequent actions that pursue different goals should not matter as much for balancing considerations to take place. If anything, people should be at least as equally willing to borrow from expected future progress of a focal goal and choose to pursue goal-incongruent actions beforehand as they are to act on past progress by choosing to pursue incongruent means afterward. However, since expectations of future progress are subject to cognitive and motivational biases, the tendency to balance between actions should reflect these biases as well. Thus, we predict that over-optimistic evaluations (e.g., Gilovich, Kerr, and Medvec 1993) will often lead individuals to overestimate their future goal progress and therefore more likely to switch to pursuing another goal.

The Present Research

Toward the above aims we conducted four studies. The first study is a field study investigating the effect of perceived progress toward one's goal of an ideal weight on the choice of high-calorie food. Study 2 tested whether perceiving greater goal progress in the academic domain mediates the effect on the subsequent pursuit of inconsistent actions. Study 3 tested whether individuals who focus on goal progress disengage from a focal goal, whereas those who think of goal commitment continue to pursue the focal goal. Finally, study 4 examined whether (overoptimistic) assessments of future progress toward keeping in good shape increase the likelihood of pursuing actions inconsistent with this focal goal in the present.

STUDY 1: PERCEIVED GOAL PROGRESS AND CHOICE

In this field study we looked at female dieters to see how a manipulation of goal progress would impact their preference for high-calorie food. We induced a sense of fast versus slow progress toward the goal of having a slim figure by asking the dieters to indicate how far off they are from their ideal weight on a scale that either had -5 lbs. or -25 lbs. as its end point. The wide scale (-25 lbs.) would lead dieters to believe they had made sufficient progress since the same discrepancy from one's ideal weight (e.g., of 4 lbs.) would appear small (e.g., 16% of the wide scale but 80% of the narrow scale). Thus, wide (vs. narrow) scale produces smaller visual discrepancy between one's actual and ideal weight, which increases one's sense of progress. The response of interest was whether dieters, who indicate

their discrepancy from an ideal weight on a wide (as opposed to narrow) scale, would also be less likely to adhere to their dietary constraints (e.g., more likely to choose a candy bar over a healthy snack).

To confirm the link between the scale type and sense of progress, we conducted a pilot study with an independent sample of 23 female dieters from the same population. Participants who drew a line to indicate the distance from their ideal weight on a wide scale indicated having made more progress toward their ideal weight ($M = 5.00$ on a seven-point scale), compared with participants who did the same on a narrow scale ($M = 2.89$, $t(21) = 3.54$, $p < .01$).

Procedure

Based on previous findings that females, more than males, pursue the goal of weight watching and consume chocolate candies (e.g., Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003), 45 females who are undergraduates at a large midwestern university participated in the experiment for \$1. Three additional participants indicated that they would not like to lose weight and were therefore excluded from any further analysis. This study employed a weight-loss scale (wide vs. narrow) between-subjects design.

The participants were handed an experimental survey titled, "How Far Are You from Your Ideal Weight?" In this survey they were asked to fill in their current weight in a box presented in the center of an empty arrow extending outward in both directions and were then asked to color the arrow all the way to the point that represented their ideal weight. It was explained to them that they could either color the right side of the arrow to indicate their interest in gaining weight or they could color the left side of the arrow to indicate their interest in losing weight. The experimental manipulation referred to the scale labels that appeared below the empty arrow. In the narrow scale these end points were -5 lbs. and $+5$ lbs. In the wide scale these end points were -25 lbs. and $+25$ lbs. Consistent with the pretest results, the different end points were expected to elicit more coloring, representing greater required progress, in the narrow (vs. wide) scale.

The experimental survey was embedded within a series of unrelated surveys in order to ensure that participants were unaware of the effect of the manipulation on their subsequent choice. Upon completion of the surveys, participants were offered a parting gift and were asked to choose between a chocolate bar and an apple. Our past research revealed that chocolate bars are seen as interfering more with dieting than apples. Finally, a thorough debriefing by the end of the experiment ensured that none of the participants was aware of our hypothesis when choosing a parting gift (apple vs. chocolate bar).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. On average, participants colored 80% (indicating 3.92 lbs.) of the weight-loss length on the narrow scale but only 46% (indicating 11.67 lbs.) of the

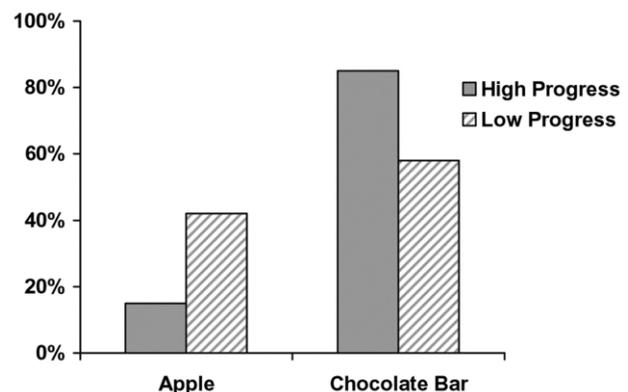
weight-loss length on the wide scale. Thus, although their ideal weight was actually farther off on the wide scale, it seemed to be visually more farther off on the narrow scale. As in our pilot study, a narrow scale induced a greater visual distance to be covered, which meant less perceived progress.

Choice of a Parting Gift. Eighty-five percent of the participants in the wide scale chose a chocolate bar over an apple as a parting gift, but only 58% of the participants in the narrow-scale condition indicated a similar choice ($\chi(1) = 4.01$, $p < .05$; see fig. 1). The results are consistent with the notion that having to rate oneself closer to the end point of a weight-loss scale induced an inference of lower progress, and, as a result, participants were more likely to select a gift that is consistent with the goal of losing weight. On the other hand, rating oneself around the midpoint of a weight-loss scale induced an inference of higher progress toward one's ideal state, and, as a result, participants were more likely to choose a tasty but fattening chocolate bar, which is inconsistent with the goal of losing weight. Perceived goal progress apparently had a direct effect on actual choice of actions. The more progress was perceived, the more likely are people to choose inconsistent activities.

Respondents were also possibly influenced by the numerical anchors of the two scales in arriving at their estimates for ideal weight. However, an explanation based on anchoring would suggest that participants who completed the wide (vs. narrow) scale and thus were planning to lose more weight should be less and not more likely to deviate from their goal. In contrast, we find these participants are more likely to choose the high-calorie candy. Also in support of our prediction, the discrepancy between actual and ideal weight (as indicated by translating the visual data to numerical values) had no effect on choice. Controlling for the discrepancy values, a regression of choice on the progress manipulation remained significant ($t(42) = 2.04$, $p < .05$). Thus, it was perceived progress, rather than the absolute

FIGURE 1

CHOOSING AN APPLE VERSUS A CHOCOLATE BAR AS A FUNCTION OF PERCEIVED PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL OF WEIGHT LOSS



difference from the ideal weight, that predicted the choice of inconsistent action.

One limitation of this field study is that in addition to manipulating goal progress, the two scales could have also impacted goal commitment, such that a small visual discrepancy on the wider scale reduces the commitment to the goal of losing weight. Note that the narrow versus wide scale was pretested for difference in perceptions of progress, but these were not measured from the participants in the main experiment. In order to clearly demonstrate the role of goal progress, the next study measured perception of goal progress to test whether the effect of initial goal pursuit on subsequent choice of action is mediated by evaluations of goal progress. That study also used a different method to manipulate perceptions of progress.

Goal progress may be inferred through several different means. For example, the setting of specific objectives is likely to activate comparison of actions against these standards. In other instances, the standards might be based on comparisons to other, accessible individuals who pursue similar objectives. Through comparison to others, individuals often obtain valuable feedback regarding their own progress toward different life goals (e.g., Mussweiler 2003). In general, comparisons to a specific target can provide feedback on goal progress or on goal commitment, but they are more often interpreted in terms of progress unless the target of comparison is known and is an admirable role model (e.g., Lockwood and Kunda 2000). Note that respondents may further be directed to evaluate progress by comparison to others.

Accordingly, in our next study we used downward or upward comparison standards, which were expected to differentially influence perceptions of progress and choice of goal-incongruent actions. Specifically with regard to academic and social goals, we predicted that perceived high progress in the academic domain would enhance the subsequent pursuit of social activities. In order to test this hypothesis, participants in the next study listed the amount of time that they intend to study on a survey form that had been previously filled out (presumably by another participant) and partially erased. In this "partially filled-out" survey, a fictitious participant listed either a small or a large amount of time to be spent studying. Using this procedure, we set an external standard of comparison in a rather incidental way, which involves minimal elaboration on the target of comparison. We hypothesized that making downward (vs. upward) social comparison increases perceived goal progress, which then induces greater interest in pursuing social activities.

STUDY 2: BALANCING ACADEMIC OBJECTIVES AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Procedure

Forty undergraduates enrolled at a large midwestern university (27 females, 13 males) participated in the experiment

for \$1. Gender of participants did not yield any effects and is therefore omitted from subsequent consideration. This study employed a social comparison standard (high vs. low) between-subjects design. At the beginning of the experimental survey, participants were asked to specify the time that they have spent on their course work in the past day. They completed their answers on a survey form that was partially filled by a fictitious participant. They were told that since that person only completed the first item, we could save paper by using this survey again. Depending on experimental condition, the fictitious respondent listed either 30 min. (low standard) or 5 hr. (high standard). The responses were crossed out but were clearly visible.

In order to increase the focus on goal progress, all the participants rated their perceived goal progress. They were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale (7 = very likely) the extent to which they feel that they are making progress toward completing their academic tasks. Finally, participant's interest in pursuing incongruent activities with the focal academic goal was assessed. They were asked to rate on a seven-point scale their interest in pursuing the following nonacademic activities: (1) go out with friends, (2) watch television, and (3) have fun. After completing their ratings, participants were debriefed and probed for possible suspicion. None of them expressed any suspicion regarding the social standard manipulation.

Results and Discussion

In support of the manipulation of low (30 min.) versus high (5 hr.) social comparison standard, participants in our study reported having spent about 3 hr. on their course work ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 2.04$). The low versus high comparison standards were therefore calibrated for the tested population. Furthermore, comparing one's progress to a low social standard increased perceived goal progress ($M = 5.20$) more than comparing one's progress to a high social standard ($M = 4.20$, $t(38) = 1.92$, $p < .05$, one-tailed).

To test our hypotheses, participants' ratings of interest in nonacademic activities were averaged across the three activities ($\alpha = 0.53$). As predicted, participants in the low social standard condition reported greater interest in nonacademic activities ($M = 5.05$) than those in the high social standard condition ($M = 4.31$, $t(38) = 2.26$, $p < .05$). A similar significant pattern was obtained for each activity separately. Next, a series of regression analyses demonstrated that perceived academic progress mediated the effect of social comparison on interest in nonacademic activities.

This analysis found that, in itself, social comparison (low vs. high) directly increased interest in nonacademic activities ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$). However, indirectly, social comparison increased perceived academic progress ($\beta = .34$, $p < .05$), which in turn increased interest in nonacademic activities ($\beta = .38$, $p < .05$). Finally, controlling for perceived academic progress, the effect of social comparison on interest in nonacademic activities diminished ($\beta = .18$, NS). Apparently the direct effect of social comparison on interest in nonacademic pursuits was mediated by the amount of

perceived goal progress induced by the social comparison information.

Participants in this study expressed a general motivation to balance between academic tasks and nonacademic activities, and their balancing motivation increased with the amount of perceived goal progress. Interestingly, however, participants in the low social comparison condition, who experienced greater sense of progress, were not actually spending more time on their course work ($M = 3.30$ hr.) than those in the high social comparison condition ($M = 3.05$ hr., $t(38) = .56$, NS). Furthermore, the actual amount of time spent studying did not predict interest in nonacademic activities ($r = -.05$, NS), and the effect of the manipulation on interest in nonacademic activities remained significant after controlling for course work time ($t(38) = 1.90$, $p < .05$, one-tailed). As in study 1 then, it was the perception of progress, rather than objective amount of progress, that predicted disengagement with a goal.

The studies so far show that the focus on goal progress increases the pursuit of subsequent activities that are inconsistent or pertain to other goals. The perceptions of progress on a focal goal were made accessible by manipulating the standard of comparison, which elicited sense of progress toward the relevant goal. However, an initial choice of action may also be used to infer one's commitment to an overriding goal, rather than goal progress. As stated previously, when actions signify commitment they are unlikely to be followed by inconsistent choice of actions. Our next study tests for this by manipulating the focus of the respondent on either commitment to a goal or on progress toward a goal. We hypothesized that initial actions motivate subsequent inconsistent choice if viewed in terms of goal progress, but these actions motivate subsequent consistent choices if viewed in terms of commitment to a goal.

STUDY 3: THE OPPOSITE EFFECTS OF COMMITMENT AND PROGRESS

As stated previously, the focus on goal commitment and progress should have opposite effects on subsequent choice of actions. In this study, we primed these mental framings by asking respondents to infer either the level of commitment or the level of progress based on an initial goal pursuit.

Procedure

Fifty undergraduates enrolled at a large midwestern university (26 females, 24 males) participated in the experiment for \$1. Gender of participants did not yield any effects. The study employed a goal focus (commitment vs. progress) between-subjects design. Upon their arrival at the lab, participants were handed a survey titled, "Self-Evaluations." They were told that in this survey they had to evaluate and predict their behavior in different situations. Based on our pilot data that undergraduates are generally concerned with studying, saving, and health maintenance, we presented information regarding these three focal goals. Participants in the condition that focused on goal commitment were asked

to evaluate their level of commitment after having imagined pursuing each of these goals, whereas participants in the goal progress condition were asked to evaluate their level of progress after having imagined pursuing each of these goals. The main dependent variable referred to participants' interest in pursuing subsequent action that was incongruent to the corresponding focal goal.

Specifically, in the academic vignette participants in the commitment condition were asked to indicate whether they feel committed to academic tasks whenever they study hard all day, whereas participants in the progress condition were asked to indicate whether they feel that they have made progress on their academic tasks whenever they study hard all day. After indicating their ratings, all the participants rated the likelihood that on such days they will choose to hang out with friends at night (an incongruent activity with studying). In a similar way, in the saving and health-goal vignettes, participants were asked to indicate their commitment (vs. progress) based on the same initial actions and then indicate how likely they are to pursue an incongruent action with the focal goal. All ratings were made on seven-point scales.

Results and Discussion

The likelihood of each target choosing a subsequent goal-incongruent action was averaged across the three goal vignettes ($\alpha = 0.44$), and in support of the hypothesis, an initial goal-consistent action increased the likelihood of choosing inconsistent actions in progress focus ($M = 4.73$) more than in commitment focus ($M = 3.97$, $t(48) = 2.50$, $p = .01$). A similar significant pattern was obtained for each vignette separately.

Furthermore, a direct test of the relationship between ratings of progress (vs. commitment) and subsequent interest in pursuing inconsistent actions revealed that, in line with our hypothesis, in the progress focus, perceived goal progress was positively related to participants' choice of goal-incongruent actions ($r = .65$, $p < .05$). However, in the commitment focus, perceived goal commitment was inversely related to participant's choice of goal-incongruent actions ($r = -.37$, $p < .05$). It appears that perceptions of commitment deter people from choosing inconsistent actions whereas perceptions of progress encourage choice of inconsistent actions. Note, however, that both progress and commitment were inferred based on an identical set of actions.

Although the role of goals in motivating consistent actions is well-known, this study suggests that subsequent actions can be systematically consistent or inconsistent toward a focal goal. Specifically, it appears that a given course of action may indicate that a goal is an important part of one's self-concept and, hence, may lead to pursuing another similar course of action or that one has made progress toward a particular goal state and, hence, this person is more likely to pursue actions that help attain other goals.

The next study sets the first step in demonstrating that progress is like a resource and applies to future as much

as past actions. Research on optimism shift suggests that the evaluation of goal progress is likely to be higher for future versus past events (Gilovich et al. 1993). The higher perceptions of progress for future actions would suggest a greater inclination to engage with goal-incongruent actions. Our next study was therefore set to test whether overoptimistic evaluations elicit greater compensation for expected progress than actual progress.

STUDY 4: BORROWING FROM FUTURE GOAL PROGRESS

The aforementioned idea was tested with regard to the goal of staying fit and among participants who expressed concern with their weight. Since people's expectations of an upcoming workout may exceed their evaluation of the workout on its completion, they should be more likely to pursue actions inconsistent with staying fit (i.e., consume fatty foods) before rather than after exercising, when they focus on goal progress.

Procedures

Fifty-two undergraduates enrolled at a large midwestern university (22 females, 30 males) volunteered to participate in the experiment. Gender of participants did not yield any effects. This study employed a time (before vs. after exercising) between-subjects design. An experimenter, who was unaware of the purpose of the study or the specific hypotheses, approached each participant individually at the entrance to a university gym facility. Depending on experimental condition, the participants in the study were either on their way to the gym facility or on their way out of the gym facility. They were all asked to rate the effectiveness of their (accomplished or upcoming) workout in making progress toward their goal of staying fit. They provided their ratings on a 10-point scale (10 = extremely effective). After listing their rating, participants were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which they would like to have a heavy (i.e., tasty but fatty) food for dinner on that night.

Results and Discussion

Optimistic Evaluations. In line with previous research, participants were overoptimistic when evaluating the effectiveness of their upcoming workout ($M = 7.58$) compared with their recently accomplished workout ($M = 6.65$, $t(50) = 1.88$, $p < .05$, one-tailed).

Choice of Inconsistent Action. As predicted, prior to their workout participants expressed more interest in consuming a tasty but fatty dinner ($M = 3.58$) than after their workout ($M = 2.88$, $t(50) = 2.63$, $p = .01$). Consistent with our underlying assumption regarding the effect of perceived progress, ratings of perceived effectiveness of workout and consumption of fatty foods were positively correlated ($r = .30$, $p < .05$). Thus, as in our previous studies, perceived greater progress predicted interest in inconsistent

choice of actions. Note that the effect of perceived progress was further independent of time of measurement, as indicated by a partial correlation, controlling for time of measurement ($r = .23$, $p < .05$). It appears that unrealistic positive expectations may lead people to overestimate future goal progress. As a result, they are more likely to overcompensate for future progress. That is, people are willing to borrow from future progress more than consuming actual progress when focusing on goal progress.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theories of self-regulation emphasize its inherent link to goal. We show in a series of studies that focusing on an action in terms of goal progress may sometimes facilitate inconsistent choice of subsequent actions. We specifically investigated four hypotheses that characterize the effect of perceived goal progress. First, subjective evaluations of progress increase interest in incongruent choice of action. Second, through social comparison individuals may acquire feedback on their relative goal progress, which increases their tendency to switch to alternative objectives. Third, whereas progress focus enhances the pursuit of alternative goals whenever the progress is satisfactory, focusing on goal commitment enhances further goal pursuit. Fourth, overoptimistic evaluations can lead people to overestimate their future goal progress, and consequently they are more likely to select inconsistent actions when considering future as opposed to past goal progress. Goals when viewed in terms of progress may thus take characteristics of resources such as time and money where people substitute among conflicting actions.

Four studies were conducted to demonstrate the aforementioned hypotheses using different goals (e.g., exercising, studying, saving, and losing weight) and different experimental procedures (e.g., self-report surveys and field studies). Study 1 found that dieters' perceptions of goal progress facilitated the choice of incongruent food (chocolate bar). Study 2 found that individuals' perceptions of goal progress through social comparison facilitated goal-incongruent choices. Study 3 showed that the choice of an action may either indicate that progress was made toward a given goal or that a person is committed to the focal goal. The nature of inferences then determined whether a person subsequently balanced among different goals by selecting inconsistent actions or whether a person maintained pursuit of a focal goal by selecting similar actions. Finally, study 4 found that overoptimistic evaluations of future progress increased choice of inconsistent means in comparison to actual goal progress. Taken together, these studies demonstrate some of the ironic effects of perceived goal progress on actual goal pursuit. We find that expected progress leads to moving away from the active goal.

Alternative Explanation

In our studies, we interpreted the pursuit of multiple goals in terms of balancing. Since in most of our studies partic-

ipants switched from a rather laborious activity to a more relaxing or tempting one (e.g., from exercising to indulging), it seems possible that participants were too exhausted to pursue yet another laborious activity. Thus, switching to an alternative goal could have resulted from mental or actual resource depletion (e.g., Muraven and Baumeister 2000). A few reasons, however, argue against this alternative for the pattern of our results.

First, the depletion model requires a certain sequence between an initially laborious activity and a subsequently relaxing activity. Since participants in some of our studies compensated for future goal progress by choosing to pursue inconsistent activities beforehand (e.g., study 4), it is unlikely that a depletion-based explanation could account for all our findings. Second, resource depletion, unlike goal progress, reflects an objective state rather than subjective perceptions. Since our studies employed manipulations that highlight perceptions of progress (e.g., studies 2 and 3), it is less likely that participants in high-progress conditions were objectively more depleted than those in low-progress conditions. Finally, in research on ego depletion an initially laborious activity was always followed by a subsequently relaxing activity. However, we show that the effect is different for progress versus commitment focus (e.g., study 3).

In general terms, our framework is not restricted to situations where a focal action has greater long-term value or where pursuing a focal goal is more taxing than its alternatives. It is potentially more general than what is implied by a self-control analysis, and it predicts that progress focus along any goal should promote choice of inconsistent actions. We further believe that depletion and balancing are orthogonal rather than competitive processes. Thus, balancing considerations represent a general metacognitive strategy of making successive decisions in a multiple goals system, whereas depletion reflects a temporary condition of low resources, which weakens self-control. Whereas balancing considerations facilitate the pursuit of goal-incongruent activities, depletion impairs the pursuit of goal-congruent activities.

Implication and Future Direction

Our research assumes a general underlying motivation to balance between successive choices. This basic motivation was often reflected in research on variety seeking (e.g., Ratner et al. 1999), but it seems to be in contradiction with research on the value of behavioral consistency (e.g., Bem 1972), which often demonstrated the effect of an initial goal pursuit on the emergence of congruent cognitions and behaviors. According to our theoretical analysis, a motivation for consistency is elicited when one's actions are framed as defining features of one's self-concept, whereas a variety-seeking motivation emerges when these actions signal progress along previously defined goals. But note that whereas variety seeking seems in many cases to be a reasonable strategy, a choice of inconsistent actions may sometimes lead to unexpected outcomes, especially whenever the progress that is attained by one action is canceled out by pur-

suing another inconsistent action (e.g., when feeling safe makes people more reckless). Our current investigation proposes an initial step in understanding such paradoxical behavioral inconsistencies.

This research further elicits other questions that could be addressed by future research. For instance, many broad, abstract goals are often broken into specific subgoals in the process of implementation. Previous research has pointed out that breaking an abstract goal into concrete actions facilitates the implementation of this abstract goal (Carver and Scheier 1998; Gollwitzer 1999). However, as subgoals are more concrete than abstract goals, it is further easier to evaluate progress toward these end states. As a result, individuals may be more likely to balance between goals when these are defined in terms of specific subgoals. Subgoals may thus facilitate overriding goal pursuit under commitment framing but inhibit further goal pursuit under progress framing. These intriguing possibilities will remain at this point interesting topics for future investigation.

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