

Research Article

Temporal mindsets and self-regulation: The motivation and implementation of self-regulatory behaviors

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Abstract

Self-regulation requires connecting desired goals (benefits sought) with means of attainment (implementation plans). Individual differences in the consideration of future consequences (CFC) can influence self-regulation. Although a high- (low-) CFC orientation has generally been considered a preoccupation with future (present) events and needs, we argue that a complete characterization also includes the ability (less ability) to construct specific action plans. With a mix of lab and field studies, we demonstrate that either general implementation recommendations or distant benefits trigger planning and motivate self-regulation for high-CFC individuals. Specific implementation recommendations coupled with proximate benefits help low-CFC individuals plan and self-regulate. In Study 1, we measure CFC and vary the temporal location of benefits and specificity of implementation recommendations to motivate exercising and show that self-generated specific plans mediate self-regulatory intentions. In Study 2, we assess actual self-regulatory behaviors for participants in a walking program. This research has theoretical implications for the temporal construal and planning literatures and practical implications for increasing self-regulation among individuals who do not consider the long-term consequences of their current actions.

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Introduction

Adherences to challenging behaviors, such as sticking to an exercise routine, eating right, and saving adequately for retirement, are acts of self-regulation. Research has documented several situational and transient factors that hurt people's abilities to self-regulate in the moment, including resource depletion (e.g., Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), salience of short-term outcomes (e.g., Wertenbroch, 1998), low-level construals of events (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006), and difficulty of goal visualization (Cheema & Bagchi, 2011). However, current challenges such as obesity and financial insolvency highlight the importance of understanding *chronic* failures in self-regulation of everyday behaviors—that is, identifying consumer segments that

are vulnerable to poor self-regulation to reach them with messages that encourage attainment of challenging behaviors. To understand self-regulation and offer ways to improve self-regulation, we examine the processes that individuals who are good self-regulators use and determine the deficiencies in motivation and abilities of poor self-regulators. To do so, we employ the consideration of future consequences (CFC) construct as a framework. This individual difference is particularly useful for understanding self-regulation because it suggests differences on both the motivation and execution of self-regulation, thereby providing a framework for constructing messages that encourage goal-directed behaviors.

Motivating and implementing self-regulation: the importance of self-generated planning

Successful self-regulation requires connecting desired goals, or benefits sought, with their means of attainment, the action

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plans (Schank & Abelson, 1977). We contend that self-regulation partly depends on the nature of the desired benefits and the action plans—that is, different benefits and plans are necessary to motivate and enable self-regulation for different individuals.

Goals vary on several dimensions, one of which is the temporal location of goal-derived benefits (Trope & Liberman, 2003). The benefits associated with enacting a goal (e.g., exercising) can lie in the proximate future (e.g., feeling energetic today) or in the distant future (e.g., building bone strength for years to come). Individuals can be motivated by either the more immediate or the more distant consequences of their current actions and, as we discuss further, reliably differ in the weight they place on near versus distant benefits.

Another important dimension on which goals vary is the specificity of means for attaining goals. Action plans can be quite general (e.g., going to the gym most days) or quite specific (e.g., lifting weights after work three days a week at the gym and walking in the park with a friend on alternate days). Means that specify the action plans in terms of context, such as “what,” “when,” “where,” and “with whom,” can facilitate implementation of goals relative to general plans for behaviors in many domains, including dieting (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008) and adherence to medical regimes (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2007). Furthermore, because contexts are inherently idiosyncratic, individuals must tailor specific plans to their own contexts for implementation. Thus, personalized specific plans that are self-modified or self-generated to fit the particular situation at hand help facilitate action.

Self-generated elaboration has been considered a cornerstone in generating message-consistent behavior in persuasion theories. Cognitive response research has shown that self-generated thoughts, rather than message recall, determine persuasion and action (Greenwald, 1968; Wright, 1973). Furthermore, research has used the Elaboration Likelihood Model framework to predict that messages that both create the motivation to elaborate on the message and ensure the recipient’s ability to do so are processed centrally to establish strong attitudes and create attitude–behavior consistency (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1981). Overall, attitude formation is stronger when individuals carefully elaborate on message content to relate it to their idiosyncratic needs and situations than when they merely recall message content or process it more shallowly.

Relating the importance of message elaboration to goal-directed self-regulation, we postulate that messages advocating self-regulation need to provide benefits and action recommendations that instigate elaboration and idiosyncratic planning to execute self-regulatory behaviors. Specifically, we argue that individuals vary in how they consider future consequences and that these differences drive the type of messages they need to motivate and enable them to create idiosyncratic plans.

CFC as a conceptual framework

Individuals reliably differ in the extent to which they consider the distant future, other than more immediate consequences, in making decisions. Those who consider the future have a relatively stable preference for resolving the dilemma between

the present and the future in favor of the future, while those who do not consider the distant future have a relatively stable preference for favoring present needs over future outcomes. Researchers have termed this individual difference “consideration of future consequences” (e.g., Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). At the extreme, high-CFC individuals may not consider immediate implications, whether positive or negative, at all, while low-CFC individuals may not consider the future consequences of their current actions.

Prior research has determined that low-CFC individuals are particularly poor at self-regulation while high-CFC individuals tend to be better at self-regulating. For example, high-CFC individuals tend to engage in healthier behaviors such as lower alcohol and cigarette use (e.g., Adams & Nettle, 2009; Strathman et al., 1994), undertake greater physical activity and healthful eating (e.g., Luszczynska, Gibbons, Piko, & Tekozel, 2004), and achieve better health outcomes for themselves (e.g., lower body mass indices; Adams & Nettle, 2009). In general, construal theory (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) links a psychologically distant mindset to self-regulation.

Previous research has explained these differential effects of CFC on self-regulation by stressing the motivational differences between low- and high-CFC individuals and has demonstrated a clear difference in preferences for immediate versus delayed benefits that accrue even years later. For example, one study showed that low-CFC individuals reported greater intentions to participate in a type 2 diabetes screening program when consequences were framed as immediate benefits and costs accrued later while high-CFC individuals reported greater intentions when consequences were framed as future benefits and costs were incurred now (Orbell & Hagger, 2006). Another study found that high-CFC individuals were more critical of arguments for energy drilling than low-CFC individuals and were not persuaded by the immediate benefits (Strathman et al., 1994). Even when low-CFC individuals are primed in a focus manipulation to think about the future, they do not weight it greatly (Boninger, Gleicher, & Strathman, 1994).

Extant research on the CFC construct has focused on the differences in benefits sought to explain self-regulation. However, the original conceptualization of CFC (Strathman et al., 1994) is broader and does not distinguish a *preference* for future consequences (e.g., “I am willing to sacrifice my immediate happiness or well-being in order to achieve future outcomes”) from the *propensity to plan* in ways that secure the future (e.g., “Often I engage in a particular behavior in order to achieve outcomes that may not result for many years”). Thus, consistent with the original conceptualization and operationalization of the CFC construct, we contend that in addition to the motivational component (i.e., consideration of distant-future vs. near-future benefits), the propensity to plan is an important difference between high- and low-CFC individuals.

With a complete conceptualization of CFC, we propose that planning propensity is a necessary component of an individual’s ability to secure future consequences and is integral to self-regulation. Thus, in addition to the different benefits that motivate high- and low-CFC individuals, these individuals differ in their

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