

Research Article

# Attenuating depletion using goal priming

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## Abstract

This research examines how goal priming can attenuate the depletion effect. Using different self-control goals (i.e., savings and healthy eating) and different measures of self-control ability (i.e., willingness to buy and actual consumption), this study reveals that when people were primed with cues related to a self-control goal and then depleted, the effect of depletion on a subsequent self-control task (related to the primed goal) became attenuated. Also, depleted people, relative to nondepleted people, reported a lower level of commitment to a self-control goal; however, when cues related to a self-control goal were primed, their level of goal commitment increased, weakening the depletion effect. This research clarifies questions related to the process underlying depletion, while highlighting the importance of goal commitment (a measure of motivation) in understanding depletion.

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## Introduction

Understanding why some people fail at self-control, while others succeed, is an ongoing quest in psychology and consumer behavior research, prompting the development of several theories (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Geyskens, Dewitte, Pandelaere, & Warlop, 2008; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999, 2002; Trope & Fishbach, 2000). One theory proposed to explain self-control failures is the depletion model (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Baumeister et al., 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), according to which each person has limited reserves of resources, such as strength or energy, which get used up when that person actively regulates, changes, or overrides his or her responses. When people engage in tasks that require self-control, they lack sufficient resources to exert additional self-control in a subsequent task, which leads to self-control failure.

The effect of depletion on self-control is well documented, with investigations in various domains, including alcoholism

(Christiansen, Cole, & Field, 2012), aggression (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007), overeating (Hofmann, Rauch, & Gawronski, 2007), impulse buying (Vohs & Faber, 2007), and so on. Because of the serious effects of depletion on self-control, research that seeks a better understanding of the mechanism of depletion is important for both theory and practice. Accordingly, the current research addresses questions related to the process that underlie depletion by exploring conditions that might attenuate the negative effects of depletion.

## Theoretical background

### *Process model of depletion*

Having established the basic depletion effect, more recent research has focused on understanding why depletion occurs, by examining ways to counteract it; in other words, many studies consider potential moderators of the depletion effect. Some researchers, taking a physiological approach, find that drinking a beverage with glucose can counteract depletion (Gailliot et al., 2007). From a psychological perspective, other researchers note that autonomy support (Muraven, Gagne, & Rosman, 2008),

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practice (Muraven, 2010), self-awareness (Alberts, Martijn, & de Vries, 2011), monetary incentives (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003), beliefs about whether willpower is a limited resource (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010), and even positive moods (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007) can counteract depletion.

Some of these findings are difficult to interpret using a resource-based approach to depletion, prompting alternative accounts of why the depletion effect occurs. In their process model, Inzlicht and Schmeichel (2012) propose that exerting self-control on a first task causes temporary shifts in both motivation and attention, which reduce performance on a second task that also requires self-control. That is, relative to nondepleted people, depleted people are less motivated to engage in control and more motivated to engage in personally rewarding or enjoyable actions; at the same time, they shift their attention away from cognitive and affective signals indicating a self-control conflict, and attend more to cues associated with reward and gratification (also see Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014). These shifts in motivation and attention may affect each other as well; when people are less motivated to regulate, they likely pay less attention to cues that signal the need for control. A reverse order of causation also may exist, such that attention affects motivation. For example, when a person's attentional resources become focused on cues in the environment that are not consistent with a self-control goal, they feel motivated to indulge.

#### *Effects of goal priming on depletion: a shift in attention*

In line with a process model, the research presented here experimentally manipulates attention toward a self-control goal, through goal priming, to advance our understanding of how depletion works. If people are encouraged, or primed, to attend to cues that signal self-control, they may become aware (consciously or nonconsciously) that self-control is needed when later faced with a self-control dilemma. If these people are then depleted by engaging in a first self-control task (unrelated to the goal previously primed), the earlier focus on cues signaling self-control may carry over to a second self-control task that is related to the goal.

Many experimental methods exist to shift attention to cues that are consistent with a goal. For example, placing a scale and diet books in front of dieters can shift attention to a dieting goal (Mann & Ward, 2007); subliminally priming words related to a diet goal via a lexical decision task similarly does so (Fishbach et al., 2003). Exposing people to thrifty retail brands, such as Walmart, can shift attention to a thrifty goal, such that they become more likely to choose thrifty products rather than more prestigious ones (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008). Priming the first names of parents, associated in their children's minds with striving for achievement, increases the pursuit of achievement goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003). On the basis of prior studies in goal priming literature, which suggest that environmental cues can shift attention to cue-related goals, this research experimentally tests whether priming cues related to a self-control goal attenuates the depletion effect.

If so, this approach could help counteract depletion, and the findings would reveal the underlying process. Formally,

**H1.** Priming a self-control goal will attenuate the effect of depletion on a goal-related task.

#### *Depletion as a motivational lapse: a shift in commitment*

As noted, within the process model, the shifts in motivation and attention should affect each other; that is, attention affects motivation. Cueing primes related to a specific self-control goal thus may attenuate the depletion effect by enhancing the motivation for depleted people to engage in subsequent self-control. Prior research highlights the importance of motivation in depletion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). For example, the depletion effect might be overcome if participants have motivational incentives (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Specifically, participants whose resources had been depleted by a prior self-control task exhibited a depletion effect (i.e., consumed very little of a healthy but bad-tasting drink). When they received a cash incentive to drink more, depletion had no effect on self-control (i.e., they consumed a substantial amount). Research examining the moderating effects of motivation thus suggests that this variable is at least part of the process, though few studies examine how less motivation might serve as a mediating effect of depletion. In response, the research presented here directly measures the role of motivation as a mediator.

Motivation can be measured in various ways. For example, Muraven and Slessareva (2003) manipulate motivation to self-regulate using cash incentives. Another measurement is goal commitment, often conceptualized as the extent to which a person desires or is determined to pursue a goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). It is likely a prerequisite for successful goal attainment (e.g., Jostmann & Koole, 2009); consistent with that notion, prior research shows that people with high versus low commitment tend to devote more effort to their goals (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Shah & Higgins, 1997). If focusing attention on primes related to a specific self-control goal attenuates the depletion effect, it may do so by enhancing the motivation for depleted people to engage in subsequent self-control, in the form of commitment toward the goal. Thus, this research predicts:

**H2.** Depleted people, relative to nondepleted people, will be less committed to a self-control goal; however, priming a self-control goal will enhance commitment toward it, which attenuates the depletion effect.

#### **Study 1**

The goal of this study is to test the first hypothesis. Therefore, participants were primed with a self-control goal (to save) or not, depleted or not, and then indicated their willingness to buy several unplanned items (i.e., to measure self-regulatory ability related to the primed goal). Depletion should hinder self-control when there is no goal priming, consistent with literature on depletion. However, when people's attentional resources are directed to a cue that relates to a self-control goal (through goal

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