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Action crisis and cost–benefit thinking: A cognitive analysis of a goal-disengagement phase ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Goal-disengagement is an important issue in goal striving.
- We focus on an action crisis as a phase when goal-disengagement is at issue.
- We analyze the cognitive correlates of an action crisis.
- Goal-related costs and benefits become highly accessible during an action crisis.

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ABSTRACT

The present research is based on the notion that disengagement from goals is not a discrete event but a process (Klinger, 1975). A critical phase in this process is when difficulties and setbacks in striving for a goal accumulate. This critical phase is termed here as an *action crisis*. Given the profound effects that people's thoughts have on their self-regulatory efficiency, it is essential to understand the cognitive correlates of an action crisis. In two experimental lab and two correlational field studies, the hypothesis that goal-related costs and benefits become cognitively highly accessible during an action crisis was tested and supported. Participants who were experiencing an action crisis in such diverse goal areas as intimate relationships, sports, and university studies, thought about goal-related costs and benefits more intensively and frequently in comparison to participants who were not in an action crisis. In an incidental learning task they recognized more of cost–benefit-items and less of implementation-items than the control group. Results are interpreted in terms of action phase specific mindsets (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012).

Introduction

Persistence in pursuing one's personal goals and disengagement from personal goals are two pivotal aspects of successful goal striving (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Carver & Scheier, 2005; Klinger, 1977; Wrosch, 2011; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003). On the one hand, without persistence individuals would never reach their goals. Hence, the capacity to resume goal-directed action after temporary interruption and to tenaciously sustain it in the face of obstacles is crucial (Feather, 1962; Heckhausen, 1991). On the other hand, disengagement from a goal may become badly necessary when striving for the goal turns out to be unrealistic or too troublesome (Brandstätter, 2003; Brandtstädter, 2007; Brockner, 1992; Carver & Scheier, 2005; Klinger, 1975; Kuhl, 1984; Staw, 1997; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al. 2003). There are many instances in all areas of life where people have difficulty disengaging from a goal (e.g., continuing one's studies despite lack of interest and/or ability; investing in an unprofitable venture; remaining in an abusive relationship). Situational as well as intrapersonal factors might render a goal unattractive and/or unrealistic (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Klinger, 1975), yet individuals might not be able to readily disengage from it which is associated with clear-cut psychological and physiological impairments (Miller & Wrosch, 2007; Wrosch, Amir, & Miller, 2011; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & de-Pontet, 2007; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller et al., 2003).

Obviously, disengagement from a goal quite often seems to be a rather difficult process as is aptly illustrated by Klinger's (1977) remark that it resembles a "psychic earthquake that will send shudders and rumbles through the person's life …" (p. 137). Although several strands of research show that the situation in which problems in goal striving accumulate has implications for affective (goal progress and affect: Carver &

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Scheier, 1981, 2005; goal disengagement failure and well-being: Wrosch et al., 2011, 2007), cognitive (goal frustration and rumination: Martin, Tesser, & McIntosh, 1993), and behavioral (entrapment/escalation of commitment in economic contexts: Brockner, 1992; Staw, 1997) processes, the dynamics of disengagement from personal goals is still not well understood. Especially, it is not known how the beginning of the disengagement process appears. In the present paper we argue that the phase in which goal disengagement becomes an issue a specific cognitive orientation prevails.

In his seminal work on the dynamics of commitment to and disengagement from incentives, Klinger (1975, 1977) was one of the first to deal with the issue of disengagement from personal goals. One of the central tenets of his analysis is that goal disengagement is not a binary event but rather a process that starts well before the individual definitively lets go of his/her goal. It is this phase of goal striving, when setbacks have accumulated and failures in making progress towards one's goal are becoming highly visible, that we are focusing on in the present paper and that we define as an *action crisis*. An action crisis is conceptualized as the phase in which the individual has already invested a great deal into his/her goal, encounters recurring difficulties, and finally is caught between further goal pursuit and disengagement (cf. Carver & Scheier, 2005). We deem it fruitful to have a closer look at this specific phase because it is inextricably intertwined with issues of goal disengagement.

The aim of the present analysis is to contribute to goal disengagement research by establishing the concept of an action crisis as a critical and distinct phase in goal striving by scrutinizing its specific cognitive correlates. A cognitive analysis seems particularly promising as theories of self-regulation agree about the assumption that the cognitive representation of goal-related concepts plays a pivotal role for self-regulatory efficiency in goal striving (Carver & Scheier, 2005; Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005; Gollwitzer, 1990; Goschke & Kuhl, 1993; Kruglanski, 1996; Kuhl & Kazén-Saad, 1988; Marsh, Hicks, & Bink, 1998; Martin & Tesser, 1996; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Accordingly, we intend to show that an action crisis is accompanied by a specific type of cognitive representation, namely cost–benefit thinking. One of the most influential models for cognitive representations in different phases of goal striving is the mindset theory of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987) on which we base our line of reasoning.

Action phases and mindsets

The mindset theory of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987) distinguishes distinct phases in the course of goal pursuit which are thought to be associated with specific tasks. On the one hand, the predecisional phase in which goal setting is pending, on the other hand the postdecisional phase which focuses on implementing the chosen goal. Accordingly, the predecisional phase involves weighing up the pros and cons of different action alternatives, whereas the postdecisional phase involves planning the necessary action steps and finally acting on the goal for which the individual has opted.

The predecisional and postdecisional phases are postulated to be accompanied by specific cognitive orientations (mindsets) which are functional for solving the task at hand (i.e., setting a goal vs. implementing a goal). An impressive body of research has documented the distinct cognitive features of the so-called deliberative (predecisional) and implemental (postdecisional) mindsets with respect to thought content and characteristics of information processing (for a recent summary, see Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012). With respect to thought content, individuals who are about to take a decision on an action alternative weigh up its pros (benefits) and cons (costs), whereas in individuals who are about to implement a goal focus on the concrete aspects of acting towards the goal (i.e., when, where and how to implement the goal), issues of costs and benefits are no longer relevant and thus are not cognitively represented (e.g., Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987). This core characteristic of the implemental mindset is clearly described by Heckhausen (1991) who posits: "Once a goal intention has been formed, all thoughts are focused on its implementation … Returning to thoughts about value and expectancy aspects of the chosen goal would be disruptive …" (p. 176). This cognitive tuning is conceived of as a self-regulatory mechanism which supports goal striving.

But what happens if goal striving is hampered, when difficulties and setbacks start to accumulate and the prospects for achieving the respective goal deteriorate, in short, when an action crisis prevails? In terms of the cognitive orientation, one would expect an action crisis to expel an individual from the typical implemental mindset associated with the postdecisional phase. But, would it put the individual back into a kind of deliberative mindset? The mindset theory of action phases remains silent about this.

There is plenty of literature suggesting that failure causes goal-related rumination (e.g., Beckmann, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2005; Kuhl, 1981; Martin & Tesser, 1989). A model that also deals with cognitive processes in different phases of action is Martin and Tesser's (1989) motivational theory of ruminative thought postulating a specific sequence of processes following the frustration of a goal (i.e., repetition of the instrumental behavior, attempting to find alternate routes to the goal, end-state thinking, negotiation for goal abandonment; cf. Klinger, 1975). Most importantly for our research, whenever the initial two phases are not successful, individuals should turn to end-state thinking which "is likely to occur when individuals have difficulty in finding instrumental behaviors that will return them to the goal. At this stage, individuals think not about different ways of attaining the goal, but about the goal objects themselves" (Martin & Tesser, 1989, p. 314). One way to think about a goal itself is in more superordinate *why* terms (i.e., costs and benefits of further goal pursuit and goal disengagement, respectively) rather than in subordinate *how* terms (i.e., concrete goal-directed behavior). Martin and Tesser (1996) characterize end-state thinking to be the prototype of rumination, which appears to be non-adaptive as the individual does not think about different ways of attaining or abandoning the goal, but cogitates about the goal's characteristics (i.e., its pros and cons). Thus, showing that an action crisis is associated with cost–benefit thinking would be an important step towards elucidating the dynamics of a critical phase in goal striving. Moreover, the theoretical scope of the mindset theory of action phases could be broadened by delineating a specific mindset associated with an action crisis.

The present research

The present research was designed to test the hypothesis that individuals in an action crisis dwell on the costs and benefits of either continuing or ending goal striving. We conducted two experimental laboratory studies and two correlational field studies to test this hypothesis with experimentally induced goals as well as with personal goals. The goals ranged from being in a close relationship (Study 1), and continuing one's major (Study 2) to going in for sports (Studies 3 and 4). In all of these studies, we compared a no action crisis group with an action crisis group with respect to cost–benefit thinking. The action crisis was induced or measured, respectively, in various manners. In the two experimental studies, 1 and 2, we presented participants with a written description of a person confronted with an action crisis or not confronted with an action crisis. In Study 3, we used a questionnaire measure to assess the degree of action crisis with respect to a personal goal. Finally, in Study 4, we probed into the thought contents of marathon runners when passing kilometer 30, which can be regarded as an objective instance of an action crisis. Likewise, cost–benefit thinking was quantified in different ways: we asked our participants to rate the frequency and intensity of their cost–benefit thinking (Studies 1 and 4), used a thought-listing questionnaire (Study 3), or assessed memory performance in an incidental learning task (Study 2).