



## Case Report

## Interventionist external agents make specific advice less demotivating

Jamel Khenfer<sup>a,c,\*</sup>, Kristin Laurin<sup>b</sup>, Eric Tafani<sup>c</sup>, Elyette Roux<sup>c</sup>, Aaron C. Kay<sup>d</sup><sup>a</sup> Zayed University, College of Business, P.O. Box: 144534, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates<sup>b</sup> University of British Columbia, Department of Psychology, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada<sup>c</sup> Aix-Marseille University, CERAM research center, Aix-Marseille Graduate School of Management-IAE, Chemin de la Quille, Aix-en-Provence 13540, France<sup>d</sup> Duke University, Fuqua School of Business, 100 Fuqua Drive, Durham, NC 27708, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Savings goal  
Advice, external agency  
Control  
Motivation  
Religion  
Banks

## ABSTRACT

Across four experiments, we explored how reminders of powerful external agents—interventionist Gods and reliable corporate institutions—influence people's motivation in the realm of financial goals. We found evidence that when people receive specific financial advice, they feel demotivated by the overwhelming flow of concrete instructions for achieving success. We found further that, under these circumstances specifically, reminders of interventionist agents bolster motivation, but that these same agents under different circumstances (*i.e.*, when people receive vague advice) instead undermine motivation. Our findings shed light on the effects of specific (*versus* vague) goal focus, and on the dynamics of compensatory control in consumer settings.

## 1. Introduction

Culture is replete with reminders of powerful external entities watching over us as we pursue important goals. Religion is one notable example (*e.g.*, “The Lord is my shepherd [...]” Psalm 23, Bible), but businesses, and in particular banks, may be another. AIG, for instance, claims to have “The strength to be there.” Aviva reminds us they are “Taking care of what's important,” and Prudential Financial promises they will be “Growing and protecting your wealth.”

These comforting messages may be a savvy marketing tool, casting companies as powerful entities that help people navigate through complex systems to achieve daunting financial goals. We argue that the idea of powerful, all-controlling external agents—religious or corporate—can strengthen people's belief that actions and outcomes are interconnected, thereby bolstering motivation to pursue goals, which would otherwise suffer from detailed advice. We propose further that, in the absence of detailed advice, these interventionist agents can instead undermine people's motivation.

## 1.1. Specific advice undermines motivation

People frequently receive advice; for instance, recommendations regarding savings and investment decisions. We might intuit that, when

it comes to long-term goals, pursuers benefit from specific advice: concrete instructions detailing each step required for achieving success. Indeed, planning can facilitate goal pursuit, though primarily when people feel confident that their actions will lead to the expected outcomes (Wieber, Odenthal, & Gollwitzer, 2010). But specific plans for long-term goals involve intricate sets of actions—subgoals that must be accomplished in tandem, over time, to achieve desired outcomes. Such plans can, paradoxically, leave people doubting their ability to succeed (Mishra, Mishra, & Shiv, 2011), and feeling distressed and unwilling to invest efforts (Powers, Koestner, & Topciu, 2005; Townsend & Liu, 2012). For example, when people think about how much they want to save in concrete (*vs.* abstract) terms—when they think about all the specific details involved—they report lower savings intentions (Ülkümen & Cheema, 2011).

Suppose, for instance, Jack wants to buy a home. If an advisor suggests he figure out his target down payment, how much he can set aside each month, and how long he can wait before purchasing a home, and then choose from a series of investment options, each with different fees and indicators of risk and return, this granular level of detail may make Jack doubt his ability to navigate this complex world effectively.<sup>1</sup>

**H1.** When people receive specific (*vs.* vague) advice, they feel less motivated to achieve savings goals.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jamel.khenfer@zu.ac.ae](mailto:jamel.khenfer@zu.ac.ae) (J. Khenfer), [klaurin@psych.ubc.ca](mailto:klaurin@psych.ubc.ca) (K. Laurin), [eric.tafani@iae-aix.com](mailto:eric.tafani@iae-aix.com) (E. Tafani), [elyette.roux@iae-aix.com](mailto:elyette.roux@iae-aix.com) (E. Roux), [aaron.kay@duke.edu](mailto:aaron.kay@duke.edu) (A.C. Kay).<sup>1</sup> Recent work shows that when people feel out of control, they can respond with increased approach motivation (Greenaway *et al.*, 2015), rather than with the demotivation we posit here. However, these findings relate to people's approach motivation toward goals unrelated to their loss of control. Here, we posit that a specific-advice-induced lack of control over financial goals will reduce motivation for financial goals specifically.

### 1.2. Interventionist agents ensure contingency and restore motivation

A sense that the world is orderly and predictable is critical to goal pursuit: Structured environments strengthen perceptions of clear contingencies between particular actions and expected outcomes (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015), which in turn facilitate goal pursuit (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014; Khenfer, Roux, Tafani, & Laurin, 2017). Put differently, regardless of ability, working hard seems pointless unless one trusts that effort and outcomes are causally linked. When people feel uncertain about their ability to control outcomes through action, they may thus seek out sources of order and predictability to restore their sense of control.

One primary resource for order and predictability is external entities—gods and governments (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008), structured brand logos (Cutright, 2012), scientific advancements (Meijers & Rutjens, 2014), and even enemies (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010)—who individuals perceive as capable of influencing outcomes on their behalf (Landau et al., 2015). When the world seems confusing, people perceive such order-providing agents as more influential, even when their influence may be harmful (Kay et al., 2008; Sullivan et al., 2010). We expect, though, that the motivational effect of interventionist agents following specific advice should be specific to agents who guarantee reliable action-outcome contingencies: If people imagine a non-interventionist God, or an interventionist, but unpredictable God, then no motivational effects should follow (Landau, Kay, Khenfer, Keefer, & Swanson, 2017).

While past research emphasizes religion as a source of order and contingency (Kay et al., 2008; Norenzayan et al., 2016; Yinger, 1970), scholars have noted that corporations can also play this role. Corporate power influences social order and people's lives through marketing and governmental lobbying (Stevenson, 1985). Furthermore, corporations are often represented as reliable partners who help consumers reach satisfying outcomes, and actively signal their ability to deliver on such promises (Eckert, Louviere, & Islam, 2012; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012).

**H2.** When receiving specific advice, the presence of a reliable interventionist agent (vs. a non-interventionist agent, or no agent) restores people's motivation.

### 1.3. Interventionist agents and motivation

Thus: Gods and corporations help bolster people's faith in contingencies between actions and outcomes when specific financial advice leaves them overwhelmed by the interrelated subgoals required to achieve their overall goal; this may in turn restore their diminished motivation. Some existing work aligns with this prediction (Kay et al., 2014; Khenfer et al., 2017). However, other work instead shows that people feel less motivated to pursue outcomes that powerful others control (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012; Meijers & Rutjens, 2014), suggesting interventionist agents *undermine* motivation.

We seek to reconcile these two contrary predictions. We predicted that after *specific* advice, people's faith in contingencies wavers, and influential agents restore motivation. But when people receive *vague* financial advice, this should prompt them to think not about the specific actions required, but about how much they value the goal (Soman & Zhao, 2011; Townsend & Liu, 2012). In turn, this allows them to generate optimistic predictions that boost motivation and performance (Ein-Gar, 2015; Mishra et al., 2011). Under these conditions, we predict people will interpret interventionist agents as reminders that their outcomes are not completely under their control. Therefore, such reminders should encourage these individuals to disengage from the goal and instead outsource responsibility to the external agents (Laurin, Shariff, Henrich, & Kay, 2012; Meijers & Rutjens, 2014):

**H3.** When receiving vague advice, the presence of an interventionist

**Table 1**  
Demographics (studies 1 to 4).

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Sample size	219	271	419	200
Panel provider	Toluna	Toluna	Prolific	Prolific
Residence	United States	United States	Great Britain	United States
Gender	72.6% female	73.4% female	55.8% female	42.9% female
Age	35 (range: 18–54)	35 (range: 18–54)	33 (range: 18–55)	31 (range: 20–54)
Religious affiliation				
Christian	48.9%	–	–	–
Non denominational	37.9%	–	–	–
Atheist	6.8%	–	–	–
Other	6.4%	–	–	–

*Note.* We determined sample size by allocating forty participants per experimental cell in Studies 1 and 2, and fifty participants per experimental cell in Studies 3 and 4 (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013). This calculus was based on a rule of thumb designed to balance power and collection costs. All studies were run in a single wave and data were analyzed only after the required sample size target was met.

agent (vs. a non-interventionist agent, or no agent) undermines people's motivation.

Four studies test our hypotheses. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions.

## 2. Study 1

Study 1 tested our hypotheses using a divine interventionist agent. We predicted that participants receiving specific (vague) advice would be more (less) motivated if they thought about an interventionist God (compared to other topics). Study 1 used a 2 (advice: specific vs. vague) × 3 (agent: interventionist God vs. creating God vs. neutral) between-subjects design.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

American residents ( $N = 204$ ; see Table 1 for details for all studies) completed a study online. We excluded 15 participants who identified as atheists because atheists do not see God as a real external agent, and because our prime might cause atheists to view the study unfavorably (Inzlicht & Tullett, 2010); analyses including atheists produced nearly identical results.

#### 2.1.2. Procedure

Participants first read one of three articles, formatted as *Science* reports. In the interventionist God condition, the article argued that recent research finds it scientifically possible for a God-like entity to intervene in the world's affairs to bring order to the universe.<sup>2</sup> In the creating God condition, the article was instead described a God-like entity who could have *created* the world, omitting any mention of active control (see Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Ning Chua & Galinsky, 2010). In the neutral condition, the article was about advances in space imaging (online appendix). Participants then answered multiple-choice questions about key words; the website terminated the session if participants answered two or more of four questions incorrectly ( $n = 31$ ; these participants are excluded from the total above).

Participants then read one of two pieces of planning advice. All participants imagined they wanted to increase their savings and had

<sup>2</sup> As in past research, we assume that participants who read about an interventionist God pictured a sober, responsible, and predictable interventionist God who could indeed reinforce action-outcome contingencies, rather than a capricious God who would more likely disrupt them.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5045702>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5045702>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)