



Goal conflict and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis



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ABSTRACT

Goal conflict has long been an important aspect of motivation theories, but the results of research on the relationship between goal conflict and psychological well-being have been inconsistent. A meta-analytic review of the literature ($k = 54$) was conducted to examine this association. Higher levels of goal conflict are related to lower levels of positive psychological outcomes and greater psychological distress, though this relationship is stronger for distress outcomes. Other moderators that produced significant differences in effect sizes were whether a goal matrix was used to assess goal conflict, whether unipolar or bipolar assessment of goal conflict was used, and whether adult or student samples were studied. This meta-analysis provides evidence that goal conflict has a negative association with psychological well-being.

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1. Introduction

The pursuit of personal goals can lead to a psychologically fulfilling life by providing meaning and structure to one's activities and identity. The sustained pursuit of meaningful goals has been associated with increases in psychological well-being (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). Goal setting and pursuit have also been associated with increased school performance (Covington, 2000), work performance (Locke & Latham, 2006), and increased physical well-being (Emmons, 2003). Setting personal goals serves to identify what is important to the individual and what outcomes are desirable and undesirable to pursue (Emmons, 2003). Problems can arise, however, when an individual holds multiple goals at the same time. When two goals lead to incommensurate outcomes or compete for the same resources, goal conflict arises.

Goal conflict is present when the pursuit of one valued goal hinders the pursuit of another valued goal (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Despite their theoretical differences, Maslow (1954, 1943), Lewin (1935), Hull (1938), and Freud (1962) all implicate goal conflict as having negative psychological implications. Modern theories of motivation also include goal conflict as a potential source of psychological strain (Carver & Scheier, 1982; DeYoung, 2015; McNaughton & Gray, 2000). Despite a clear theoretical consensus regarding the effects of goal conflict on psychological well-being, there have been contradictory and inconsistent findings in the lit-

erature and thus a quantitative review of the association between goal conflict and psychological well-being is warranted.

Goal conflict can arise for a number of reasons. Some goals conflict because simultaneous pursuit of both goals involve incompatible strategies (Segerstrom & Nes, 2006; Wilensky, 1983). Such goals as "Be more assertive" and "Be well-liked" may be incompatible, as making progress towards one of these goals typically undermines progress toward the other (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013). This inherent goal conflict should be distinguished from other forms of goal conflict that may arise because resources are finite and the individual must choose which goal to pursue and which goal to set aside (Segerstrom & Nes, 2006). Resource conflict arises even when goals are not necessarily incompatible, but draw on the same finite resources. Goals such as "Get ahead at work" and "Spend more time with my kids" are not inherently incompatible but both require significant amounts of time to be achieved.

Goal conflict hinders the ability to pursue goals because the pursuit of one goal comes at the expense of another goal. Inhibited goal progress in turn is associated with decreased psychological well-being (Sheldon, Jose, Kashdan, & Jarden, 2015). Previous research has found that higher levels of goal conflict are associated with increased rumination about goals, more inhibited goal pursuit, and decreased goal progress (Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Cantor, Acker, & Cook-Flannagan, 1992; Kleiman & Hassin, 2011). Boudreaux and Ozer (2013) argue that the decreased goal progress associated with goal conflict should lead to increases in psychological distress, and may serve as a call to modify one's goals or strategies.

Goal conflict may be resolved in at least three different ways (Wilensky, 1983). Goal conflict resolution may occur if the

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individual finds a way to achieve both conflicting goals. If goal conflict cannot be resolved in this fashion, the individual may opt to partially or fully abandon one of the conflicting goals. The emphasis on a focal goal can help to direct attention towards the goal that is most valued (Kruglanski et al., 2013). Finally, goal conflict may also be resolved spontaneously by an external circumstance (Wilensky, 1983). The manner in which goal conflict is resolved may in part depend on the circumstances giving rise to the conflict (e.g. inherent or resource conflict).

The empirical picture concerning the relationship between goal conflict and psychological well-being is less clear. Multiple studies have found that increased goal conflict is associated with greater psychological distress, and lower psychological well-being (e.g. Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013; Emmons & King, 1988). Other studies have failed to detect a relationship between goal conflict and well-being (e.g. Kelly, Mansell, & Wood, 2011). Despite the mixed empirical picture, previous theoretical work has suggested that goal conflict should be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being (Michalak, Heidenreich, & Hoyer, 2011) and so we expect to find goal conflict to be negatively related to positive psychological outcomes, and to be positively associated with negative psychological outcomes.

1.1. Psychological well-being and distress

Costa and McCrae (1980) argue that well-being is not a unitary concept, but is composed of both positive and negative aspects. Past research has identified that the positive aspects of psychological well-being (e.g. satisfaction with life) are only moderately related to the negative components of well-being, such as depression (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Pavot & Diener, 1993). These two components of psychological well-being have been differentially predicted in the past by various aspects of personality. Negative aspects of well-being tend to be related to the personality trait of neuroticism, whereas the positive components are more often related to extraversion (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008).

The finding that different variables predict the positive and negative components of well-being is also evident in the goal conflict and pursuit literature. Emmons and King (1988) reported a significant association between goal conflict and negative affect, but found no relationship between goal conflict and positive affect. The opposite was found by Freitas, Clark, Kim, and Levy (2009) who reported goal conflict was significantly associated with positive affect but not negative affect. A recent meta-analysis on goal pursuit and well-being treated positive psychological outcomes and psychological distress as distinct outcomes and found goal progress was more strongly related to positive psychological outcomes than to distress outcomes (Klug & Maier, 2015). The current meta-analysis seeks to reconcile disparate findings regarding whether goal conflict is more strongly associated with well-being or psychological distress. Because of this distinction between distress and positive facets of well-being, the authors will refer to well-being as the global assessment, while distress and positive outcomes will be used to refer to the more specific aspects of well-being.

1.2. Assessment of goal conflict

Different assessment techniques have been developed for the measurement of goal conflict. The most popular method has been the matrix technique of assessing goal conflict (e.g. Emmons & King, 1988). This method consists of eliciting personal goals from a participant in an open-ended fashion. A matrix is then created so that each goal is paired with every other goal. The participant is then asked to rate the extent to which the pursuit of one goal

makes it easier or more difficult to pursue the paired goal. Scores from these responses are then aggregated to create an overall conflict rating. This method is well suited to assessing conflict among idiographically assessed conscious goals.

Another commonly used technique of goal conflict assessment is the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT; Slade & Sheehan, 1979). The RGT is derived from personal construct theory and is used as a method of assessing intrapsychic conflict (Kelly, 1955). The Repertory Grid Technique begins with three psychological concepts that are important or relevant to the participant, with one these concepts representing the self (e.g. “Myself” or “My ideal self”). The researcher then asks the participant to evaluate the relationship (positive or negative) between concepts in each of the three pairings of the three concepts. Conflict is present when the participant reports that either one or three of the perceived relationships are negative. One particular aspect of the RGT that is of interest when considering goal conflict is the implicative dilemma. Implicative dilemmas in the RGT occur when positive progress made in one construct threatens progress in another (Feixas, Saúl, & Ávila-Espada, 2009). Slade and Sheehan (1979) provide the example triad of “myself”, “parties”, and “depression”, where the method would identify conflict in a person who likes parties, states that parties increase the experience of depression, and that the depression is unwanted and disliked. Implicative dilemmas have been used as measures of motivational conflict for general life goals in clinical populations as well as healthy populations.

The final widely used tool for the measurement of goal conflict is the Computerized Intrapersonal Conflict Assessment (CICA; Lauterbach, 1996) which measures perceived inconsistency among psychological concepts. The CICA is used by giving the participant a set of three psychological concepts, similar to the three concepts used with the RGT (such as “Myself”, “Success at work”, and “Leisure time”; Michalak et al., 2011). The individual then rates the degree to which the concepts are important to oneself (e.g. the degree to which “Success at work” and “Leisure time” are important to the participant). Perceived conflict is assessed by asking the participant the extent to which the pursuit of each concept has a positive or negative effect on the ability to pursue the other concepts (e.g., more success at work means less leisure time). The CICA has also been used with values and beliefs in measuring conflicting groups of concepts, but our interest here is CICA methods that involve goals (Lauterbach & Newman, 1999). An example of this method in predicting clinical outcomes is presented in Renner and Leibetseder (2000) who reported that individuals high in conflict presented greater levels of somatization, depression and anxiety.

The diverse methods that have been used in goal conflict research have created challenges when comparing results across studies (Kelly, Mansell, & Wood, 2015). These methods differ mainly in the manner goals are assessed. In matrix approaches, goals are assessed by asking participants list their important goals. In contrast, both the CICA and the RGT methods use goals supplied by the researcher. Once the goals are established, goal conflict is similarly assessed in each method. One cause for concern is the low correlation of $r = 0.07$ between the matrix assessment of conflict and the CICA, suggesting that these two forms of measurement are assessing different constructs and cannot be used interchangeably (Michalak et al., 2011). For this reason, the method of assessment has been included as a moderator of the relationship between goal conflict and psychological well-being.

1.3. Goal conflict: bipolar or unipolar scales?

Early research on goal conflict assumed that goal conflict and goal facilitation were bipolar opposites. Many initial studies using goal matrices used bipolar measurements, with one end of the

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