



Fate as a motivated (and de-motivating) belief: Evidence for a link from task importance to belief in fate to effort

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Fate
Motivation
Effort
Task importance
Motivated cognition

ABSTRACT

The perception of whether one has personal control over a specific task or goal has been shown to be a crucial predictor of effort and persistence. Given this, one might expect people to perceive high personal control over tasks that are very important. However, drawing on emerging theories of motivated ideological belief, we suggest that, in some circumstances, the more a task or goal is perceived as important, the more likely people may be to believe that the outcome is “fated” – that the outcome of an event is predetermined and meant to be. Across four studies, employing diverse samples and contexts, we provide evidence for this basic phenomenon and the negative repercussions it can hold for effort expenditure. Implications and avenues for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.

Shakespeare (1603/2000)

In this passage from *Hamlet*, the titular character is on the verge of one of the most important tasks in the play's narrative: a dangerous duel with Laertes. How does he prepare? He reminds himself of – or resigns himself to – the power of fate.

Though duels are (fortunately) not very common nowadays, everyday life is full of tasks judged as especially important, defined here as how consequential the actor (e.g., worker at an organization or participant in a study) perceives the outcome of the task to be, whether for the self or others (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Grant, 2008; Sanchez & Levine, 1989; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989). Thus, whether it is a personal project that someone perceives has consequential outcomes, a task that a boss tells her employee is important for the firm, or a student petitioning his university administration to change a policy he cares about, the outcomes of some tasks are simply felt to be more important than others.

On one hand, the degree to which people are willing to commit time

and effort to a task is influenced by perceptions of controllability – higher perceived task control predicts more effort, investment, persistence and better performance (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Bandura, 1982; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989; Schunk, 1991). One might imagine, then, that people would be inclined to adopt stronger beliefs of personal control when confronted with especially important tasks. That is, because one of the ways to ensure a positive outcome is through personal control over the outcome (Stevens & Gist, 1997), when people face a task that they perceive as important, they should be more inclined to believe that they have personal control over the task's outcome. By believing that they can personally bring about a desired outcome, they can then subsequently perform better or persist longer on the task. However, recent research on motivated belief and psychological outsourcing suggests another possibility. When faced with sufficiently stressful circumstances, people do not merely engage in beliefs or cognitions that give them the best chance of improving their objective situation. Rather, to cope with the stress associated with these situations, they also draw upon culturally available beliefs and ideologies – including those that might limit their own personal responsibility for the outcome (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008).

Understanding the content of these beliefs, as well as the conditions that might bring them about, is important. Not only because doing so can advance our understanding of the psychological processes

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underlying specific types of ideologies or prevalent socio-cultural belief systems, but also for the consequences that processes like these might hold for individual effort in meaningful contexts. Although drawing on culturally available worldviews has been theorized to exert anxiolytic properties (Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008; Tullett, Kay, & Inzlicht, 2015) that can sometimes free people up to engage in active goal pursuit (Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012), if the worldview in question holds content that demotivates, the benefits may quickly disappear or even reverse. We would not contend that Hamlet would actually prepare less for a deadly duel than one that was merely for sport. However, to the extent that the gravity of Hamlet's task might compel him to draw upon beliefs that, while soothing and comforting, are also in some ways antithetical to effort and persistence (for example, by increasingly believing that fate will ultimately be the true decider of his outcome), it is possible that his preparation and work ethic might suffer to some degree.

In the context of much less murderous affairs, we seek to examine whether this can happen. To do so, we examine two inter-related hypotheses: (i) whether tasks that are judged (or framed) as more important will lead those engaging in the task to increase their belief in how "fated" its outcomes are; and (ii) if so, whether these emergent beliefs in fate will be associated with effort on the task. We now turn to a more elaborate discussion of these predictions.

1.1. What is fate?

Although fate is a widely held belief (Burrus & Roese, 2006), it has seen little scientific attention. Fate has been defined by psychologists as the belief that outcomes of an event are predetermined and that whatever happens was meant to be (Norenzayan & Lee, 2010). At its extreme, this implies that once an event begins, regardless of an individual's actions or inaction, agency or passivity, the final outcome will be the same. If someone is fated to be late for work, they will arrive late, regardless of whether they wake up early or not, or which route they take in their morning commute. Importantly, believing in fate is not the same as believing in luck or chance, in which outcomes are attributed to randomness. Outcomes that are fated are destined, not subject to randomness and happenstance (Norenzayan & Lee, 2010; Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997; Raphals, 2001, 2003).

1.2. Will important tasks increase belief in fate?

The importance of a task or issue – how consequential the agent perceives the outcome of the task to be, whether for the self or others – has been shown to increase feelings of threat, anxiety, and other forms of psychological discomfort (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Paterson & Neufeld, 1987). And although a task's importance is often associated with its direct relevance to the self, it need not always be. That is, someone may view the task as being consequential for others (high importance) without the outcome having a direct influence on the self (low personal relevance, e.g., overthrowing a foreign dictatorship). On the other hand, someone may view the task as having no consequence at all (low importance), but it may be highly self-relevant (e.g., buying a pen for one's own writing). Past research, however, has often used tasks that contain aspects of both importance and personal relevance (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Davis et al., 1992; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Grant, 2008; Sanchez & Levine, 1989; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989), making it unclear whether the effects of importance are at least in part driven by personal relevance. One of the goals of this research, therefore, is to test whether the effects of a task's importance matters when it is relevant for the self versus others.

Nonetheless, empirical studies have shown that tasks perceived to be important can be psychologically or emotionally straining, increasing stress and negative affect. Compared to low-stakes testing, high-stakes testing environments are more likely to induce anxiety and stress in students (Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Von Der

Embse, & Barterian, 2013). Furthermore, helping prepare students for their high stakes testing also increases anxiety and nervousness in parents and teachers (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). In organized sports, young male wrestlers and soccer players who attach greater importance to both performing well and winning a match feel more anxious and have more frequent worries about failure (Lewthwaite, 1990; Lewthwaite & Scanlan, 1989). At work, employees who rate performance-related goals, like the ability to prove competence, as especially important are most likely to feel stressed at work (Morris, Messal, & Meriac, 2013). Adults who attach substantial importance to life goals also report more psychological distress, pressure, and tension (Sellers & Neighbors, 2008). In a longitudinal study following graduates transitioning from school to the workplace, the importance of self-generated goals was generally positively associated with stress (Dietrich, Jokisaari, & Nurmi, 2012). And finally, the more a person cares about a negative outcome of someone he or she is close to, the more stress he or she feels (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Shin, & Purcell, 2015).

One means for coping with this type of psychological strain, we suggest, is to draw upon ideologies of external control – that is, ideological beliefs that imply that the individual actor is not solely responsible for what occurs and that, regardless of what happens, there is an (often unseen) order to all outcomes (Kay et al., 2008; Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). Belief in basic order has been shown to reduce anxiety (Tullett et al., 2015) and research has shown that in times of stressful and threatening situations, people are more likely to rely on ideologies that provide structure and meaning (Jost, 2006). Religious ideologies, such as a belief in God, can alleviate anxiety stemming from a lack of control (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Kay et al., 2008). Likewise, non-religious ideologies of external control – ranging from scientific determinism (Rutjens, van Harreveld, van der Pligt, Kreemers, & Noordewier, 2013) to trust in governments (Kay et al., 2008; Shepherd & Kay, 2012) to hierarchical means of social organization (Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014) – can all compensate for aversions to disorder and randomness when personal control is low or when issue complexity is high.

In a similar fashion, fate, in which each event is bound for one unalterable outcome via an unseen order, may also be an attractive ideology to draw upon in the context of important tasks. Believing in fate can facilitate coping after a devastating loss (e.g. losing a child in military action; Somer, Klein-Sela, & Or-Chen, 2011), improve future well-being after a traumatic event (e.g. death of a spouse; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011) and help people cope with existential threats (e.g. death anxiety; Hui, Bond, & Ng, 2007). Fate can also present itself as an appealing tool when considering complex or difficult decisions (Tang, Shepherd & Kay, 2014).⁴

For these reasons – that is, (i) the tendency for important tasks to engender psychological discomfort, (ii) recent research demonstrating the psychological utility of drawing on worldviews that suggest external control, and (iii) correlational research noting the appeal of fate as a coping mechanism – we suggest that belief in fate may increase when people are faced with tasks they deem especially important.

⁴ To be clear, task importance is different from task complexity or task difficulty (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009). Complexity refers to the number of different and connected parts in a task. An important task may also be complex (e.g., the importance and complexity of negotiating with different world leaders), but they need not always co-occur (e.g., the importance but relatively low complexity of voting for the student government, the complexity of building a model train but the relative low importance of doing so). Task difficulty refers to how hard it is to achieve an outcome. Again, although an important task may be difficult (e.g., getting permits to open a restaurant), they need not always co-occur (e.g., the importance but relative ease of voting for the student government, the difficulty of finishing a hiking trail on a leisurely Sunday afternoon but relative low importance of doing so). We thus build upon the Tang et al. (2014) paper in two ways. In addition to studying task importance, as compared to decision complexity, which is the focus of the Tang et al. (2014), paper, our research examines effort as a downstream consequence of belief in fate, while the Tang et al. (2014) paper focused only on belief in fate.

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