

## Review

# Goal conflict and well-being: A review and hierarchical model of goal conflict, ambivalence, self-discrepancy and self-concordance



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews empirical evidence for associations between goal conflict, ambivalence, self-discrepancy, self-concordance and well-being. The research indicates that goal conflict, ambivalence and discrepancy impede well-being, whilst concordance promotes well-being. The evidence was strongest for ambivalence, self-discrepancy, and self-concordance, and weakest for goal conflict. A hierarchical conceptualisation of the four related constructs is presented. Goal conflict, ambivalence, and self-discrepancy may occur at different levels within a goal hierarchy, which ranges from abstract, high level goals to low-level, concrete goals. Self-concordance is conceptualised as a property of the goal hierarchy, where goals are un-conflicted and facilitate intrinsic motivations and needs. Conflict at multiple or higher levels in the hierarchy may pose greater problems for well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

The present paper presents an integrative review of empirical research concerning the relationship between four motivational concepts; goal conflict, goal ambivalence, self-discrepancy and self-concordance; and well-being. The present paper reviews the evidence for the association between these constructs and; (a) psychological distress and the presence of clinical symptoms, (b) physical health, and (c) positive well-being such as quality of life. The inclusion of the latter outcomes is consistent with calls to place an equally-weighted focus on both positive and negative aspects of well-being in understanding psychological distress (Wood & Tarrier, 2010). Goal conflict, goal ambivalence, self-discrepancy and self-concordance have previously occupied distinct research domains, with independent theoretical bases, vocabulary, and approaches to assessment (Table 1). However, they each refer to different forms of conflict (or agreement) between different types of goals or values for which an individual is striving.

This article adopts a narrative rather than a meta-analytical approach to integrating this research. Cooper (2003;

Psychological Bulletin Editorial) argues that whilst a meta-analysis is often a default option for a review, there are circumstances where such an approach might be unnecessary or improper. For example, he argues that where studies have utilised decidedly different methodologies, participants and outcome measures, meta-analyses can mask important differences in research findings. It is suggested that in these cases, summary statements are more appropriate than meta-analytic approaches. Hinshaw (2009; Psychological Bulletin Editorial) agrees that the presence of different paradigms across a literature precludes amalgamation of studies using meta-analytic approaches. Further, Baumeister (2013) argues that narrative reviews can be useful for combining different kinds of evidence to formulate a broad theoretical formulation, such as that proposed in the current review. Thus, a narrative approach was adopted in the current review.

### 1.2. Hierarchical reconceptualisation of the four concepts

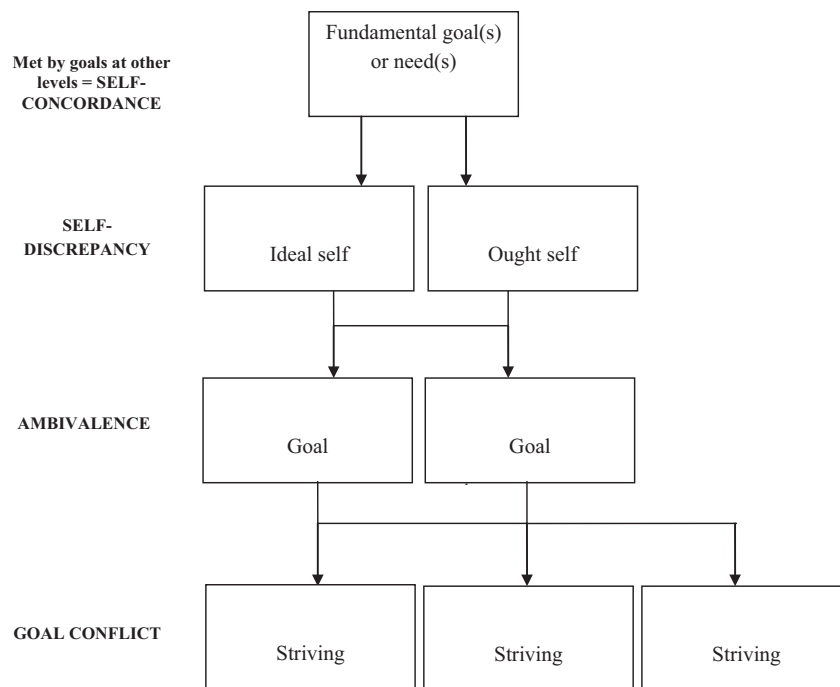
In order to integrate this research and begin to draw broader conclusions regarding the relationship between motivational conflict and well-being, this article proposes a reconceptualization whereby each of these concepts is seen to refer to conflict or agreement between goals at different levels within a goal hierarchy, from ongoing daily strivings to fundamental personal values and needs (Fig. 1). This paper is the first to integrate these four concepts within a single model, although this is consistent with

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**Table 1**  
Overview of the four motivational concepts.

	Definition	Assessment	Example
Conflict between goals, plans or projects	When pursuit of one goal undermines or precludes the successful pursuit of another	Matrix methods, e.g., Strivings Instrumentality Matrix Computerised Intrapersonal Conflict Assessment (CICA)	"I want to work long hours to get ahead in my career, but I also want to spend lots of time with my family and friends"
Ambivalence	When a person both wants and doesn't want to pursue or achieve a goal	Item from the Strivings Assessment scale – "How unhappy would you be if you succeeded in this goal" Ambivalence over Emotional Expression Questionnaire	"I am trying to give up alcohol, but I'm not sure I'll be happy if I succeed. Part of me wants to stop drinking alcohol completely, but part of me doesn't want to stop"
Self-discrepancy	When a person's actual, ideal, and ought selves or senses of self are different or incompatible	Self Discrepancies Questionnaire Incongruence Questionnaire CICA	"I'd ideally be a brave, spontaneous and impulsive person, but I ought to be a practical, sensible and reliable person"
Self-concordance	When a person is pursuing goals that help them achieve their overall needs and motivations	Individuals list their goals and rate them on various features, e.g., instrumentality to life goals, autonomous motivation	"Having good relationships is what is most important to me, so my goal is to spend lots of quality time with my family and friends"



**Fig. 1.** A hierarchical model of goal conflict. *Note.* The figure above depicts a schematic representation of part of an individual hierarchy of goals, indicating levels at which conflict may occur.

research that subscribes to a hierarchical understanding of goal pursuit and self-regulation (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1982; Emmons, 1999; Watkins, 2011). Our hierarchical perspective assumes that at the highest level, there are a small number of core, basic, human goals and needs such as food, safety, and acceptance from others, which have a number of sub-goals that specify the means to attend these goals. Thus, goals can be said to be mentally represented in an organisational framework, which includes fundamental values and motivations at the more abstract, high levels, and more practical, concrete, goals at the low levels. Control Theory proposes that within a goal hierarchy, abstract, high level goals set or define the necessary sub-goals, so that the concrete, low level goals or strivings an individual pursues help them to

achieve their important high level goals (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Powers, 1973; Powers, Clark, & McFarland, 1960).<sup>1</sup> For example, a high level goal of 'be a good person' might dictate lower level goals of 'do volunteer work', 'help others' or 'give to charity', which would further specify even lower-level goals which specify how the individual should carry out these activities.

From a hierarchical perspective, 'goal conflict'; when two goals, plans or projects compete for the same resource such as time or money (e.g., Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2006); could be viewed as occurring at the lower levels of a goal hierarchy. Low-level goals represent what an individual is trying to do, or not do, in their everyday behaviour, for example, "spend more time with my partner".

Ambivalence about pursuing low level goals is conceptualised as conflict between the goals or motives at the level above (Kelly, Mansell, & Wood, 2011). At this mid-level are goals or principles that represent 'being goals', for example, to "be a good parent", or "be successful in my career". Ambivalence about pursuing

<sup>1</sup> Other approaches have considered specific forms of conflict, for example role conflict or work-life conflict. However, this review focuses on conflict between participants' own personal goals and senses of self, rather than general or pre-defined roles.

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