



The Future and the Will: Planning requires self-control, and ego depletion leads to planning aversion



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ABSTRACT

Planning is a future-directed thought process that is highly beneficial, but it requires mental effort. Informed by the strength model of self-regulation, four studies ($N = 546$) tested the hypothesis that willingness to plan is linked to good self-control. A correlational study ($N = 201$) found that people high in trait self-control had done more planning than other people and also intended to make more plans during the upcoming week. A laboratory experiment ($N = 105$) induced a state of ego depletion (i.e., impaired self-control) by having some participants continuously break pre-established motoric habits, and afterward these participants were less willing to make plans for the next four weeks than control participants. A field experiment ($N = 112$) used a naturally occurring induction of decision fatigue (IKEA shopping) and again found that ego depletion reduced planning. Specifically, fatigued shoppers exiting the store expressed more reluctance to make long-term plans than shoppers who were just arriving at the store. A final laboratory experiment ($N = 128$) found that ego-depleted participants were only half as likely to choose a planning task as control participants, and identified *effort avoidance* as a mediator mechanism. Crucially, the three experimental manipulations were longer and stronger than the 5-min depletion tasks often used in previous research (24 min; 2 h; 30 min), and manipulation checks confirmed severe and significant ego depletion. Depletion had no effects on aspirational goals or the desire to relax. We conclude that wants and desires come easily, while planning requires mental work akin to self-control. Theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Planning is a cognitive activity that creates a narrative about the future, in which a series of actions follows a meaningful sequence to lead to a positive outcome, usually in the form of reaching some goal. Planning is a vital feature of human rationality, enabling people to make decisions based on what they want to achieve in the future, whether this be tomorrow or decades hence. Through the act of planning, people can prepare themselves for what to do next and thus stay on track to reach their goals and other desired outcomes and to avoid various costly and aversive outcomes. It is therefore important to understand how and when people choose to make plans, as opposed to neglecting plans.

Plans thus constitute a highly pragmatic form of future-oriented thinking. They are also quite common in people's daily lives: In an

experience-sampling study, Baumeister, Hofmann, Summerville, and Vohs (2016) found that three-quarters of all thoughts about the future involved planning. Crucially, planning was also found to be highly linked to effortful control of thought.

The present investigation was based on the assumption that planning takes mental effort. If so, planning may resemble other forms of effortful cognition that produce long-term benefits but are performed unevenly, such as self-control and rational decision-making (for review of the latter two, see Baumeister & Vohs, 2016b). People may fail to engage in planning, self-control, and rational decision-making because the necessary mental effort to do so consumes a limited resource. The hypothesis driving this research is that the same self-regulatory resource may be involved in all three of these activities, such that when the resource has been partly depleted by prior (and even irrelevant) activities, people are less likely to make plans. Broadly speaking, we

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aim to show that higher levels of self-control (both trait and state) lead to a greater willingness to plan. The underlying assumption is that planning requires disciplined mental control to reason out how to reach long-term goals while anticipating obstacles and contingencies.

1.1. Thinking about the future

Planning, like most forms of thinking about the future, is widely assumed to be almost absent among nonhuman animals. Informed by a large literature review, Roberts (2002) (see also Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007) concluded that animals are “stuck in time.” That is, they live in the present and, at most, project expectancies only a few minutes into the future. In contrast, humans can mentally simulate distant future events and contingencies. This so-called mental time travel (Suddendorf & Corballis, 1997; Tulving, 1984) is not only a specifically human trait but also a highly adaptive one. People can improve their long-term outcomes by basing current behavior on anticipated future outcomes (Baumeister, Vohs, & Oettingen, 2016; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013).

Self-control has also been shown to be a highly adaptive trait. One foundation of empirical research on self-control is Mischel's (1974) studies of delayed gratification. These showed that children who were better at delaying gratification, thereby gaining increasing rewards by orienting toward the future, grew up to be more successful than others, both socially and occupationally (Mischel, 2014). Research in economic decision-making has linked good self-control to maximizing long-term outcomes by overcoming a common tendency to discount future rewards (e.g., Loewenstein, Read, & Baumeister, 2003). Indeed, evidence from 80,000 participants across 76 different countries found that individual variation in patience was a strong predictor of economic outcomes both within and between countries, even when controlling for other relevant variables such as trust, culture, institutions, and access to natural resources (Dohmen et al., 2015). That is, individuals and countries that value future rewards (over smaller rewards in the present) tend to perform better economically. Ample other work has found that people with high self-control fare better in a wide range of outcomes (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012; Moffitt et al., 2011).

Thus, self-control often works by linking the present to the future, so that present actions produce desirable future outcomes. Planning is also about the future, creating guidelines for how to act in particular situations to produce subsequent benefits. And like self-control, planning has also been shown to produce beneficial outcomes. Conscientious and plan-oriented individuals are, on average, more successful in life than those who are reluctant to make plans (e.g., Ameriks, Caplin, & Leahy, 2003; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Lynch, Netemeyer, Spiller, & Zammit, 2010). People with prefrontal brain damage or other malfunctions of brain and mind are often characterized by a lack of planning and an inability to plan (e.g., Elliott et al., 1997; Fortin, Godbout, & Braun, 2003; Semkowska, Bédard, Godbout, Limoge, & Stip, 2004). On a social level, it would be nearly impossible to function in larger groups and cultural systems without the ability to plan ahead, in part because much of the coordination and division of labor in modern economies is anchored in future goals.

1.2. Planning, prediction, and pragmatic prospection

Several important lines of work have incorporated the notion of bringing future considerations into the present. In general, these studies have asked people to make predictions about what is going to happen. This line of inquiry includes studies of unrealistic optimism (Shepperd, Klein, Waters, & Weinstein, 2013; Weinstein, 1980), affective forecasting (i.e., the prediction of one's future emotional states) (Gilbert, Pines, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005),

and the use of trained and selected teams to predict important collective events (Tetlock & Gardner, 2016; Tetlock, Mellers, Rohrbaugh, & Chen, 2014).

But does prediction capture the full essence of prospection? Building on William James's (1890) much-quoted assertion that “thinking is for doing,” Baumeister et al. (2016) proposed an alternative view. Prediction may be helpful, but pragmatic prospection goes beyond simple prediction to involve preparation for action, often by articulating highly specific, coordinated sequences of actions designed to produce an outcome—in a word, planning. Research participants can certainly offer predictions when asked to do so, but perhaps in everyday life people think about the future more in terms of what they should do or want to do than in terms of what is most likely going to happen.

A recent experience-sampling study yields ample evidence of pragmatic prospection (Baumeister et al., 2016). Although the most common temporal focus was on the present, usually in combination with a pragmatic focus on performing certain tasks and duties, thoughts about the future far outnumbered thoughts about the past. Moreover, as we noted previously, most thoughts about the future were reported to involve planning. Thus, it seems imperative for researchers to supplement their studies of prediction and forecasting to include planning.

In summary, self-control helps people manage cognitions and actions so as to maximize future rewards, and cognitions about the future typically involve planning. This led us to consider possible links between self-control and planning.

1.3. Self-control variations and planning

Self-control is the capacity to override and regulate intuitive processes and dominant responses, generally in service of reaching one's goals or fulfilling one's values. The strength model (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016b; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007) claims that the capacity to exert self-control is analogous to a physical muscle. People are indeed different in their capacity for self-control, so some individuals will have better self-control than others across different situations. Individual differences in self-control reflect trait-like patterns in how effectively people exert self-control in various activity domains (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). In addition to such differences, the capacity for effective self-control fluctuates within individuals and across different circumstances. Again, the muscle analogy is apt: Some people are clearly stronger than others, but a given person's muscles may also function better on some occasions than others (e.g., when well-rested vs. fatigued after strenuous exertion). The state of reduced capacity for self-control, corresponding to muscular tiredness, has been dubbed “ego depletion” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Baumeister & Vohs, 2016b). This research has documented a broad range of negative effects of ego depletion on executive function and self-regulation – such as increased impulsiveness, diminished persistence, irrational bias, and increased discounting of future rewards.

In general, self-control and ego depletion affect controlled executive processes, or what Stanovich (1999) and Kahneman (2011) refer to as System 2 processes. System 1 processes are mostly not directly affected by ego depletion. For example, in intellectual performance, depletion reduces intelligent thought on tasks requiring reasoning, inference, extrapolation, and other controlled processes, while the more basic and automatic components of intelligent thought such as rote memorization remain unaffected (Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). More recently, a series of experiments found that controlled processing was depleting, and conversely, that the state of low self-control led to cognitive miserliness and heuristic decision-making (Vonasch, Sjøstad, Maranges, & Baumeister, 2017).

When resources have been expended, people seem naturally inclined to conserve what is left. Ego depletion effects do not indicate that the brain has run out of fuel, but rather that the brain is conserving its

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