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Motivated misperception: Self-regulatory resources affect goal appraisals

Michelle R. vanDellen [a,*], Catherine T. Shea [b], Erin K. Davisson [c], Christy Z. Koval [d], Gráinne M. Fitzsimons [d]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, USA
[b] Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, USA
[c] Department of Psychology, Duke University, USA
[d] Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Three studies examine the impact of resource depletion on goal appraisals.
- When participants are resource depleted, they appraise their personal goals in ways that excuse inaction.
- Resource depletion also changes perceptions of the necessity of human involvement in societal goals.
- Resource depletion may not only decrease goal pursuit but justify a lack of goal pursuit.

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ABSTRACT

Three studies examine how self-regulatory resources affect goal appraisals, finding support for the hypothesis that when low in self-regulatory resources, individuals endorse statements that rationalize either inaction or less effortful goal pursuit. Study 1 examines appraisals of self-set personal goals, finding that resource-depleted participants describe their goals as less urgent and less consequential. Study 2 examines reappraisals of weight loss goals, replicating the effects of Study 1. Finally, Study 3 examines this reappraisal process in the context of a broader societal goal of environmental conservation. This work contributes a new perspective to the large literature on resource depletion by demonstrating that depletion alters cognition in ways that may excuse the well-documented decrease in behavioral pursuit that arises from resource depletion.

Introduction

Imagine that you have a goal to lose 10 pounds. At times, the goal feels highly important, and it seems imperative that you pursue it right away—bathing suit season is just months away! At other times, the goal seems important, but less urgent: You feel you could postpone goal pursuit and still accomplish the goal in time. And at other times, the goal itself seems less consequential: You find yourself thinking that wearing a baggy t-shirt to the beach wouldn't be so bad. As suggested by this example, *goal appraisals*—individuals' cognitions about and evaluations of their goals—are not fixed. They fluctuate in response to competition from other goals (e.g., if you desire a promotion, minor weight loss may seem frivolous; Emmons & King, 1988; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002), and they likely also fluctuate in response to other situational pressures, although such effects have not been widely studied (c.f., Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007). In the present work, we explore the possibility that goal appraisals vary as a function of self-regulatory resources.

In particular, we test the hypothesis that individuals who are temporarily depleted of self-regulatory resources (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) appraise their goals in ways that justify less effortful goal pursuit or temporary inaction altogether. A large body of research has established that self-regulatory depletion leads individuals to behave in a less goal-directed manner, showing reduced resistance to temptations and less persistence on goal-directed tasks (Baumeister et al., 1998; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010; cf. Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010). For example, depleted individuals consume greater quantities of tempting foods, spend more impulsively, and persist for less time on academic tasks (Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003; Vohs & Faber, 2007; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000).

We suggest that resource depletion may also lead individuals to excuse or rationalize their lack of goal pursuit by reducing the perceived urgency of goal pursuit or the perceived consequences of failure to engage in pursuit. This novel hypothesis that resource depletion changes goal appraisals is supported by recent evidence that depletion manipulations can shape perceptions and cognitions (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2003; Wan, Rucker, Tormala, & Clarkson, 2010). For example,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA.
E-mail address: mvd@uga.edu (M.R. vanDellen).

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resource-depleted participants perceive tasks to take longer than do control participants (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2003), demonstrating that depletion changes perceptions of current states. Similarly, participants feel more certain about attitudes they form while depleted, presumably because they feel as though they exerted more effort in developing the attitude (Wan et al., 2010). Although the vast majority of research on self-regulatory resources has understandably and importantly emphasized behavioral consequences, understanding the social cognitive consequences of this ubiquitous phenomenon may also be fruitful for our understanding of self-regulation. The present research contributes to burgeoning efforts to address this potentially rich and important topic by examining the effects of self-regulatory resources on goal appraisals.

The current studies

Three experimental studies tested the hypothesis that resource depletion produces goal appraisals that justify inaction. In each study, participants first completed an experimental manipulation of self-regulatory resources and then evaluated a goal. In Study 1, participants provided appraisals of a self-set personal goal. In Study 2, participants currently trying to lose or maintain their weight appraised their weight loss goals. These two studies present the core tests of our hypothesis.

Study 3 extends the investigation to a new type of goal, to explore the applicability of these ideas to broader societal goals. If individuals justify their own individual inaction when depleted, they might also justify societal inaction when depleted. If so, then this effect could have important downstream social consequences. In Study 3, participants appraised a broader societal goal (i.e., to protect the environment). Additionally, in Study 3, we examined an individual difference variable moderator, to test for a boundary condition on the effect. Specifically, we examined whether social value orientation, the extent to which individuals chronically value societal issues, moderated the effect of resource depletion on appraisals of the necessity of environmental conservation actions. If so, it suggests that individuals who are strongly motivated in a given domain may be able to buffer themselves from the social cognitive effects of depletion.

Study 1

Study 1 provides a first test of the hypothesis that resource depletion leads individuals to endorse goal appraisals that justify low effort. Such justifying appraisals may take many forms, as a diverse range of appraisals could allow individuals to rationalize the lowered action that results from their depleted state. For example, they could devalue the goal outcome, postpone pursuit, reduce the contingency of goal outcomes on current pursuit, or extend the possible timeline for pursuit. In this first investigation of the hypothesis, we thus included items measuring a wide-range of possible rationalizing appraisals.

We also measured direct reports of commitment to the goal. Because resource depletion manipulations produce only temporary reductions in capacity for goal pursuit, we expected that individuals would experience correspondingly temporary changes in their goal appraisals—that is, that they may not condemn the goal entirely and forever, but rather would just devalue their current pursuit of the goal. However, it is possible that depleted individuals may also change their minds about the importance of a given goal entirely, and thus report low goal commitment. For that reason, we also examine the effect of resource depletion manipulations on reports of goal commitment.

Method

Participants

We recruited 60 adults (70% female; $M_{age} = 33.50$, $SD = 12.38$) residing in the United States from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). No participants' scores on any variable were more than three standard deviations from the group mean and thus no participants were excluded from analyses.

Procedure

Participants first provided a goal that they planned to pursue or continue pursuing, to be completed within the next three months. Thus, all participants wrote about an active personal goal. Next, based on random assignment, participants completed either the control or depletion version of a regulatory resource manipulation (Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). In the control condition, participants were presented with an image file of a passage and asked to retype the passage. In the depletion condition, participants were asked to retype this passage without using the space bar or the letter 'e.' One participant did not fully complete the typing task but results excluding this participant indicated no change in level of significance for any of the outcome variables. Therefore, we retained this participant.

Next, participants completed a questionnaire measuring a broad set of potential goal appraisals that might excuse inaction (e.g., "I'm not worried about making progress on this goal now because I know I will have time to progress on it later;" "Sometimes I think this goal is too lofty;" see Table 1 for a full list of items). Finally, participants completed a four-item measure of goal commitment ("I am committed to this goal;" "This goal is very important to me;" "I put a lot of energy and effort into working towards this goal;" and "I identify strongly as someone who cares about this goal").

Results and discussion

Analytic strategy

By design, the goal appraisal items represented a broad range of strategies one might take to excuse inaction. Thus, agreement with one item does not necessarily indicate agreement with another. For example, if one agrees that a goal is too lofty, that does not imply that one thinks that one has a lot of time left to achieve it. Indeed, if agreement with one item satisfies a desire to rationalize inaction, that reduces the likelihood of agreement with subsequent items. In line with this logic, the goal appraisal items do not statistically cohere into one scale, $\alpha = .15$. The goal commitment items, in contrast, formed an internally consistent scale, $\alpha = .89$. To appropriately interpret the results given the low internal consistency of the goal appraisal items, we conducted the analyses differently. When analyzing commitment, we treated the items as a scale, first calculating each participant's mean response and then using that variable as a dependent variable in an independent samples t-test. However, when analyzing goal appraisals, we conducted a mixed model ANOVA treating experimental condition as a between-subjects variable and item (i.e., appraisal type) as a within-subjects/repeated measures variable. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each item by condition.

Main analyses

Our primary hypothesis was that individuals in the depletion condition would more strongly endorse appraisals that would justify inaction than individuals in the control condition. Results of the 2 (condition: control, depletion) × 5 (item) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of condition. As predicted, participants in the depletion condition more strongly agreed with statements justifying low immediate effort than did participants in the control condition, $F(1, 58) = 4.53$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .07$. A main effect of item emerged, $F(5,54) = 34.52$, $p < .0001$, simply reflecting that overall, participants agreed with some items more than others (see Table 1), but no interaction between condition and item emerged, $F(5, 54) = 0.08$, $p = .995$, $\eta^2 = .002$. In addition, we examined the effect of depletion condition on ratings of goal commitment. The manipulation produced no significant effect on goal commitment ($M_{depletion} = 6.03$, $SD = 0.72$; $M_{control} = 5.93$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(58) = -0.42$, $p = .676$, $d = 0.12$.