



## Counteractive evaluation: Asymmetric shifts in the implicit value of conflicting motivations

Ayelet Fishbach<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ying Zhang<sup>b</sup>, Yaacov Trope<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The University of Chicago, Booth School of Business, 5807 S. Woodlawn Ave., Chicago, IL 60637, United States

<sup>b</sup>McCombs School of Business, University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station B6700, Austin TX 78712, United States

<sup>c</sup>Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Four studies investigate asymmetric shifts in the implicit value of goal and temptation that pose a self-control dilemma. We find that accessible goals reduce the implicit positive valence of tempting alternatives, whereas accessible temptations increase the implicit positive valence of goal alternatives. We observe these asymmetric shifts across two self-regulatory domains: healthful food consumption (vs. indulgence) and the pursuit of academic excellence (vs. leisure). These findings suggest that two conflicting motivations can exert opposite influence on each other's implicit evaluation.

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Self-control dilemmas pit goals that offer long-term and global benefits against tempting alternatives that offer short-term, local benefits and interfere with the attainment of the goals. For example, for dieters to achieve their ideal weight, they must forgo culinary delights, and to do well academically, students must pass up opportunities to socialize. Self-control processes serve to secure the attainment of long-term goals when tempting alternatives are available (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985; Loewenstein, 1996; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Rachlin, 1997). The question we examine in this article is how self-control processes change the value individuals assign to activities that pertain to goals and temptations. Do cues for temptation alter the evaluation of the goal? Correspondingly, do cues for the goal change the evaluation of interfering temptations? Can these evaluative changes occur outside conscious awareness? We hypothesize an asymmetric pattern of change in the value of goal- and temptation-related alternatives: Whereas goal-related cues decrease the value individuals assign to tempting alternatives, temptation-related cues increase the value they assign to goal-related alternatives. We further hypothesize that these asymmetric shifts in value can be implicit and require no conscious awareness of the self-control response.

### Counteractive control

Self-control conflicts arise when temptations threaten people's ability to adhere to their goals. According to counteractive control theory, perception of such threats elicits explicit and implicit processes designed to counteract or offset the influence of the temptations (Fishbach & Converse, *in press*; Fishbach & Trope, 2005, 2007; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009; Trope & Fishbach, 2000). These counteractive processes are asymmetric; that is, they undermine the strength of temptations and bolster the strength of the goal. As a result, the likelihood that the individual will resolve the self-control dilemmas in favor of the goal increases.

Counteractive control processes can alter the availability of choice alternatives as well as their mental representation, and they can take an explicit as well as an implicit form. Thus, people may decrease the strength of tempting options by decreasing their availability. For example, they may skip purchase opportunities and maintain only a small supply of cigarettes, alcohol, or fattening food, in order to secure pursuit of their health goals (Ainslie, 1992; Schelling, 1984; Thaler & Shefrin, 1981; Wertenbroch, 1998). Correspondingly, people may also increase the strength of the goal by increasing the availability of goal items. For example, people might maintain a large supply of healthy products and take advantage of purchase opportunities of such items.

Counteractive control processes modulate the representation of the choice situation through selective attention, encoding, and interpretation of the choice alternatives. For example, research shows that people form "cool," abstract, or psychologically distanced representations of temptations that serve to attenuate

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [ayelet.fishbach@ChicagoBooth.edu](mailto:ayelet.fishbach@ChicagoBooth.edu) (A. Fishbach).

the impact of appetitive temptations on choice (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Mischel & Ayduk, 2004). In addition, people may refrain from temptations by forming a psychologically close representation of goal-related items in order to increase the impact of those items on choice.

Counteractive control processes may also have an implicit mode of operation that acts to increase the strength of the goal or decrease the strength of temptations (Amodio et al., 2004; Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Fishbach & Shah, 2006; Gollwitzer, Bayer, & McCulloch, 2005; Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999). These implicit processes differ from other more explicit self-control processes, which require deliberation, depend on processing resources, and characterize the conscious exertion of will (Mischel, 1996; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Trope & Neter, 1994; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). For example, Fishbach et al. (2003) find that people automatically activate the representation of goal constructs in response to cues for temptations. In their studies, a subliminal presentation of temptation-related cues (e.g., the word *chocolate*) facilitated lexical decisions for concepts related to a more important goal (e.g., *diet*). If counteractive control is asymmetric, then people may also automatically inhibit competing motivations when they wish to focus on a particular goal pursuit. Indeed, in their research on goal shielding, Shah, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2002) observed that a subliminal presentation of goal-related cues interferes with lexical decisions for concepts related to competing motivations. Approach and avoidance tendencies may serve the same implicit counteractive control function. Consistent with this idea, Fishbach and Shah (2006) show that individuals in a self-control dilemma are faster to respond to goal-related words (e.g., *study*) by pulling, hence approaching (vs. pushing), and they are faster to respond to temptation-related words (e.g., *television*) by pushing, hence avoiding (vs. pulling). Thus, people can increase the motivational strength of the goal relative to temptation by implicitly approaching goal items and avoiding temptation items.

#### *Asymmetric counteractive evaluation*

The present research explores a new implicit counteractive control process, namely, implicit counteractive evaluation. Past research on implicit counteractive control has examined implicit counteractive changes in the accessibility of goals and temptations (Fishbach et al., 2003) and the approach and avoidance tendencies they elicit (Fishbach & Shah, 2006). In contrast, implicit counteractive evaluation changes the valence of goals and temptations. Importantly, the present research provides a more direct test of the asymmetry hypothesis, which requires systematic manipulation of the presence of goal- and temptation-related cues and assessment of their opposite effects on each other's valuation.

We define counteractive evaluations as asymmetric changes in the evaluative meaning of choice alternatives due to their statuses as goals vs. temptations. Counteractive control systematically alters the subjective evaluation of the available options so as to increase the motivational strength of goal-related options relative to tempting alternatives: Exposure to temptation prompts attempts to bolster the value of the goal, and exposure to a goal prompts attempts to devalue the temptation. As an example of bolstering the value of goals, a dieter who faces an opportunity to indulge in tasty but fatty food may spontaneously focus on what makes having a slim figure emotionally gratifying or socially desirable and thus temporarily boost the subjective value of dieting. Exposure to temptation may thus increase the value of the opposing goal, such that making the person aware of the costs of adhering to a goal (e.g., foregoing pleasurable alternatives) will make the goal more (rather than less) valuable.

Corresponding to an increase in the value of goals when temptations are present, the asymmetry hypothesis suggests that reminding a person of a goal renders the value of tempting alternatives less positive. Thus, the dieter will discount the value of fatty food in response to cues for the dieting goal. Although in and of themselves temptations represent desirable outcomes that people would otherwise pursue, we predict that whenever the opposing goal is salient, these tempting activities will acquire negative valence.

We argue, then, that counteractive evaluation entails asymmetric shifts in the implicit subjective value of goal and temptation. That is, temptation-related cues augment the value of the goal, whereas goal-related cues undermine the value of temptation. As a result, counteractive evaluation may render adhering to the goal more attractive than yielding to the temptation, and the individual will be more likely to resolve the initial conflict between the two in favor of the goal. In line with earlier research on implicit counteractive control, we further predict that counteractive evaluation can occur outside conscious awareness. In short, in addition to changing the accessibility of and approach-avoidance tendencies toward goals and temptations, implicit counteractive control might also change their evaluative meaning, resulting in a more positive attitude toward goals and a more negative attitude toward temptations.

#### *The goal dependency of counteractive evaluation*

Previous research on implicit counteractive control is unclear as to whether the observed activation patterns reflect pre-existing associations in memory between goals and temptations or a self-control response to an active conflict. For example, in Fishbach et al.'s (2003) studies, the activation of goal by temptation (e.g., *chocolate* primes *diet*) could have reflected memory traces of previous self-control processes of resisting temptations by elaborating on an overriding goal. Alternatively, the activation of goal by temptation could have reflected an active response of resisting temptations by increasing the accessibility of the goal.

We suggest that asymmetric shifts in value are a counteractive self-control response to an active conflict rather than memory traces. Therefore, these shifts in values should occur only while the individual experiences a self-control conflict and not after the conflict is resolved. Because the self-control conflict ends after the goal is completed (Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005), reminding a person of the goal should not result in a more negative evaluation of competing temptations, and exposure to temptations should not result in augmenting the value of the completed goal.

This analysis is consistent with research on goal-driven implicit evaluations (Brendl, Markman, & Messner, 2003; Custers & Aarts, 2005; Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson & Bargh, 2004), which shows that goals influence the implicit value of related objects or actions only when they have high priority for the individual. For example, Ferguson and Bargh (2004) observed that thirsty participants automatically evaluated words related to drinking (e.g., *water*, *juice*) as relatively more positive than goal-irrelevant words, but this positive evaluation persisted only as long as participants did not quench their thirst. Custers and Aarts (2005) find that such implicit positivity increases efforts toward goal completion. Participants who associated goal states with implicit positive evaluations were more likely to select objects related to satisfying these goals than were participants who established no such association. Notably, although participants in these studies were aware of their goal states, they were unaware of the implicit evaluative patterns that enabled them to regulate and ultimately reach these end states. Those in a self-control dilemma might similarly be aware of the goal they wish to achieve or the temptations they would need to resist to reach that goal, but the downstream evaluative patterns

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