Goal Conflict and Changes in Psychological Distress
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Abstract
Goal conflict is central to both classic (Lewin, 1935; Miller, 1944) and contemporary (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) theories of motivation. However, there is a lack of an extensive empirical foundation for documenting the effects of goal conflict in modern research. The purpose of this study is (1) to evaluate the kinds of goals people report as conflicting; (2) to examine patterns of correlations with measures of subjective well-being, and (3) to determine if goal conflict is associated with changes in psychological distress. Participants’ academic goals conflicted with affect control (e.g., reduce stress), social (e.g., go to a concert), and health/fitness goals (e.g., exercise at the gym). Conflict was positively associated with negative affective states, and predicted increases in depression, anxiety, and somatization. These results demonstrate the practical implications of goal conflict but a clearer conceptual framework and wider nomological network is needed to further develop this construct.

Introduction

Goal conflict is central to both classic (Lewin, 1935; Miller, 1944) and contemporary (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) theories of motivation. However, there is a lack of an extensive empirical foundation for documenting the consequences of goal conflict. Goal conflict occurs when the pursuit of one goal undermines the pursuit of another valued goal. The role of goal conflict in psychological well-being is unclear. Emmons and King (1988) reported associations between conflict and high levels of negative affect and psychosomatic complaints. Sheldon and Kasser (1995) and others (e.g., Kuhl, 2003; Kuhl, Manell, & Wood, 2011; Segrinstrom & Solberg, 2006) were unsuccessful in replicating these results. The assessment of goal conflict has been problematic. Each of the above studies assessed goal conflict with complicated goals, and used bipolar scales anchoring goal facilitation against goal conflict. Riediger (2007) reviewed evidence to suggest that conflict and facilitation are confounded predictors of well-being. Using simpler scales and an uncomplicated assessment procedure, we predicted that goal conflict would be predictive of negative affective states and changes in those states over time.

Current Study Objectives

• To describe the phenomenology of goal conflict, and to assess its pattern of relations with psychological well-being. This will be accomplished by evaluating:
  o Goal pairs that students report as conflict (Table 1)
  o Associations between goal conflict and psychological distress (Table 2)
  o Regression coefficients predicting change in psychological distress symptoms controlling for baseline levels (Table 3)

Methods

Participants
188 undergraduate students (13% women, 48 men, 1 did not indicate their gender)

Average age was 19 (SD = 1.3, range = 18 – 32)
41% Asian or Pacific Islander, 29.5% Latino/Latina, 7% Caucasian, 4% African American, 7% Middle Eastern or Indian, 4.5% mixed, other, or had missing data

Measures

• Goal Elision
  Participants were asked to provide 8 goals that are currently important to them
• Goal Conflict and Goal Facilitation
  The goal-generated goal pair was paired with another goal in the participant’s goal set using computer software
  • Participants compared each goal with every other goal, and were asked on a 5-point unipolar scale (1 = not at all conflicting, 5 = very conflicting)
  • Judges whether working toward one goal interferes with working toward and attaining another goal
  • Goal facilitation was similarly assessed

Subjective Well-Being and Psychological Distress
• Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)
• Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Grifflin, 1985)
• Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18, Derogatis, 2000)

Procedure
Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes
The first assessment took place during the first 2 weeks of the winter quarter (N = 180); the second assessment took place 4 to 6 weeks later (N = 170)

All subjects participated electronically

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents examples of goal pairs that respondents rated as highly conflicting. As shown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Conflict</th>
<th>Goal Facilitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academically oriented goals conflicted with a range of social, financial, health, and affect control goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents correlations of goal conflict and goal facilitation with subjective well-being and psychological distress. As can be seen:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Goal Conflict</th>
<th>Goal Facilitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatization</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 167, *p < .05, **p < .01, †p < .001, two-tailed.

Results and Discussion (Cont.)

Table 3 presents standardized regression coefficients predicting future distress from goal conflict and initial distress levels. As shown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Adj. R²</th>
<th>Distress Variable Time 1</th>
<th>Goal Conflict Time 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression T2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41.50</td>
<td>.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>42.95</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety T2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45.86</td>
<td>.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>47.04</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Somatization T2
1 | 33.81 | .58** | .07 | --- | --- |
2 | 36.99 | .57** | .08 | 15** | .06 |

N = 137 p < .05, **p < .01, two-tailed.

Conclusions

• The results of the current study showed that a great majority of conflicts were due to limited resources (e.g., time spent socializing or working conflict with studying and succeeding in school)
• Individuals with higher ratings of conflict reported greater levels of negative affect and psychological distress
• Persons with higher ratings of facilitation reported greater life satisfaction and positive affect
• When conflict persisted over 4 to 6 weeks, conflicted persons reported significant increases in depression and psychological symptoms

References